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**From the Virgin of Guadalupe to El Santo: New Motifs and
Directions in Contemporary Chicano/a Writing**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative Literature

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Numerous Originals in Colour



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Declaration

I declare this thesis to be all my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at any other university. None of the material included in this thesis has been published elsewhere.

Eva Fernández de Pinedo

Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary Chicano/a writing, focusing on its revisionist direction. It argues that Chicanos/as re-conceive aspects of their culture that they do not relate to and adapt them to their socio-political circumstances. Mexican and Chicano/a culture and history are re-articulated, including issues of feminism, sexuality and race.

Chapter one comprises two sections. The first puts contemporary Chicano/a literature into context by exploring its inception and its link with the Chicano movement. The second section then begins to discuss the body of this thesis - the revisionist direction of Chicano/a writing. Thus, the adaptation of Mexican and Chicano/a history and mythology by contemporary writers is analysed. Some of the problems faced by these authors are also examined, such as the pressure to provide an 'authentic' portrayal of the community.

Chapter two concentrates on Catholicism and the ways in which Chicana writers combine their religious beliefs with their everyday realities. It discusses the Virgin of Guadalupe, as this is a central figure in Chicana writing and art. This chapter demonstrates that instead of seeing her as a symbol of passivity, Chicanas now interpret her as a source of female empowerment.

Chapter three explores the different approaches undertaken by Chicana writers to revise children's stories. It analyses how authors incorporate in their writing not only mainstream tales such as *The Wizard of Oz* but also the Mexican tale of La Llorona.

Chapter four discusses how Mexican and Chicano/a popular culture is articulated in literature, focusing on art forms such as the *telenovela*. It studies the many layers of meaning of such art forms and the ways in which they help to construct Chicanos/as' transnational identity.

The conclusion argues that current Chicano/a literature is a complex body of work, moving towards a more individualistic writing. It is suggested that despite being a community-oriented writing, authors feel freer to give a more personal view on aspects such as ethnicity or religion.

This thesis contributes to Chicano/a literary studies by revealing the revisionist approach of recent Chicano/a writing and by discussing the work of previously unexplored authors.

Introduction

'Yo no soy mexicano. Yo no soy gringo. Yo soy chicano. No soy gringo en USA y mexicano en México. Soy chicano en todas partes. No tengo que asimilarme a nada. Tengo mi propia historia.'¹

'I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture.'²

According to the latest census, the Latino/a population has become the first minority of the United States with 35.3 million inhabitants.³ It is estimated that, from this number, 23 million are of Mexican origin, with 8.3 million being born in Mexico, and 14 million are U.S. citizens of Mexican origin.⁴ The impact of this group is greatly felt not only in the United States, but also in the mother country. In the last decade, Mexican immigrants have sent \$45 billion back to Mexico.⁵ In the United States, Latinos/as and especially Chicanos/as are gradually obtaining more political, social and economic power. During the 2001 presidential elections, the importance of the Latino/a vote was indicated by Al Gore's and George W. Bush's use of the Spanish language and Latino/a sartorial style during their campaigns. Bush's recent plan to legalise the three million Mexican illegal immigrants residing in the United States is said to be related with the fact that he will need 40% of the Latino/a vote in order to win the 2004 elections.⁶ The demographic rise in Chicanos/as during the last

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *La frontera de cristal. Una novela en nueve cuentos* (Madrid: Santillana, 1996), p. 294.

'I am not Mexican. I am not North American. I am Chicano. I am not North American in USA or Mexican in Mexico. I am Chicano everywhere. I don't have to assimilate to anything. I have my own history.'

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 21.

³ 'Los hispanos son 10 años más jóvenes que la media de EEUU', *El País*, 11 May 2001, available at <http://www.elpais.es>

⁴ 'Emigrants sent more than \$45 billion to Mexico in last 10 years', in <http://www.hispaniconline.com>, 5 December 2001.

⁵ Ibid.

David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek also remark that 'It is estimated that the remittances sent to Mexico from wages in the United States are its second source of revenue. Those resources play a vital role in the local and national economy – even in the very survival of the emigrants' families and hometowns.' 'Introduction', in *Culture Across Borders. Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture*, ed. by David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), pp. 3-26 (p. 5).

⁶ 'La Casa Blanca planea conceder la residencia a más de tres millones de inmigrantes clandestinos mexicanos', *El País*, 16 July 2001, available at <http://www.elpais.es>. According to this article, in the 2001 elections, Bush only obtained 30% of the Latino vote, which tends to vote Democrat.

decades has been accompanied by the flowering of its cultural production, particularly literature.⁷ During the 1960s, the civil rights movements and especially the Chicano movement encouraged and facilitated the writing and publication of many Chicano/a literary works. During the 1960s and 1970s, male writers dominated the literary scene, placing emphasis on notions such as community and ethnic pride. However, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of Chicanas such as Sandra Cisneros and Cherrie Moraga who dealt with gender and sexuality, issues previously ignored in Chicano/a writing. Chicanas also engaged in a discussion of the oppression and racism suffered by this minority, but they prioritised a female perspective. Another important contribution by Chicanas was the inclusion of issues of homosexuality in the articulation of the Chicano/a experience. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga denounced homophobia within the Chicano/a community, and drew attention to the different oppressions suffered by lesbian Chicanas. To this day, women's writing highlights the complexity of Chicanas' subjectivity, revealing the oppression of women inside and outside the Chicano/a community. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues that 'the Chicana experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture.'⁸

Chicanas inherit a cultural baggage with which they do not identify, be that because of its patriarchal dimension or because of its lack of connection with their lives. In an interview, Sandra Cisneros states that 'I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it. [...] We accept our culture, but not without

⁷ The recognition of this literature is accompanied by a growing critical literary work that is linked with the publication of specialized journals such as *Aztlán* or *Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*. The journal *Aztlán* is published by the University of California, Los Angeles and *Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies* is published by the University of California, Davis.

⁸ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, 'Chicana Literature from a Chicana Perspective', in *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 732-37 (p. 733).

adapting ourselves as women.⁹ Hence, Chicanas feel the need to revise their culture and re-articulate it in a manner that enables them to better identify and embrace it. Not being capable to relate to the passive icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe or with treacherous female figures, these writers (and artists) re-examine the history and mythology from which they emerge and invest them with an empowering significance.

My work focuses on the revisionist direction of Chicano/a writing and thus I discuss four themes that reflect this tendency. Chicano/a history, religion, children's tales and popular culture are questioned as to their capacity to address the socio-economical situation of Chicanos/as and to empower them. Disagreeing with the ways in which they have been traditionally articulated in culture and society, Chicano/a writers re-charge these four areas with a more positive meaning. This revisionist approach has a two-fold purpose. Firstly, writers re-conceive their cultural heritage, eradicating its patriarchal and homophobic dimension. Anzaldúa echoes this attitude as she believes the Chicana must 'reinterpret[] history and, using new symbols, [...] shap[e] new myths.'¹⁰ Secondly, Chicanos/as challenge the mainstream's essentialist representations of this ethnic group as exotic and deeply traditional. Much Chicano/a writing can be interpreted as a counternarrative to mainstream images of Latinos/as. My work draws attention to the emerging notions of an *authentic* Chicano/a writer and writing, promoted by Chicano/a writers and critics. I believe the ease with which certain critics label other Chicano/a writers or texts as 'not ethnic or Chicano enough' needs to be addressed. I discuss the work of the *dissenting* Richard Rodríguez, Michelle Serros and John Rechy as they propose new notions of Chicanidad. By embracing their *inauthenticity*, these writers present new ways of looking at ethnic identity.

⁹ Pilar E. Rodríguez Aranda, 'On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros', *The Americas Review*, 18.1 (1990), 64-80 (p. 66).

¹⁰ *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 82.

Chicano/a literature encompasses many diverse topics, making it difficult to summarize the overall content and theme. In the critical book accompanying an anthology on Chicana literature, Tey Diana Rebolledo places emphasis on the multifaceted nature of this writing as it 'has become a vast and enormous complex field'¹¹ and it reflects that 'having multiple identities in various cultures also allows for shifting perspectives [...]' (p. xi) In his analysis of Chicano/a poetry, *Movements in Chicano Poetry*, Rafael Pérez-Torres makes a similar claim as he states that Chicano/a cultural production does not 'manifest a singularly fixed, original, authentic configuration. They [are] involved in an endless project of becoming, rather than being, Chicana/o.'¹² Re-interpreting traditions and symbols forms part of this 'project of becoming', of constructing a new Chicano/a cultural identity.

The reconfiguration of Mexican culture allows Chicanos/as to address their hybrid identity and also to resist assimilation. My study of these re-articulations shows that Chicano/a culture is not simply a continuation or re-enactment of Mexican culture but something else, a transformed variant of the latter. Susan E. Keefe and Amado M. Padilla express a similar view in *Chicano Ethnicity*: '[...] the culture of Chicanos [...] is distinctive and moreover, a third way of life possessing many unique features, rather than simply an amalgamation of Mexican and American cultures.'¹³ One of the characters of Carlos Fuentes's novel *La frontera de cristal* summarizes this idea: "'Yo no soy mexicano. Yo no soy gringo. Yo soy chicano. No soy gringo en USA y mexicano en México. Soy chicano en todas partes. No tengo que asimilar a nada. Tengo mi propia historia."¹⁴ The idea of Chicanos/as having a 'propia historia', their own history, will become clear in chapter one, as I explain

¹¹ Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow. A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), p. x.

¹² Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Movements in Chicano Poetry. Against Myths, Against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 30.

¹³ Susan E. Keefe and Amado M. Padilla, *Chicano Ethnicity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), p. 7.

¹⁴ Fuentes, *La frontera de cristal*, p. 294.

how the Chicano movement allowed Chicanos/as to assert their presence and be seen as an active part of United States' society.¹⁵

The texts discussed herein address the ways in which Chicanos/as come to terms with their liminality.¹⁶ Chicano/a writers express the need to combine two cultures and ways of life and they criticise the inability to be accepted by Mexico or the United States. The problems involved in coming to terms with this dual identity are dealt with by many of the writers included in this study. Chicano/a literary and cultural studies have adopted this subject, although not always through the employment of the term 'liminality.' For instance, Ilan Stavans refers to Latinos/as as having a 'life in the hyphen':

We are all to become Latinos *agringados* and/or *gringos hispanizados*; we will never be the owners of a pure, crystalline collective individuality because we are the product of a five-hundred-year-old fiesta of miscegenation that began with our first encounter with the gringo in 1492.¹⁷

Many writers have addressed the idea of Chicanos/as existing in a border space and in-between state. Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska notes that 'Chicanos are caught between two worlds that reject them: Mexicans who consider them traitors, and Americans who want them only as cheap labor'.¹⁸ In an interview, Sandra Cisneros also speaks of the dilemmas of inheriting two cultures:

We're always straddling two countries, and we're always living in that kind of schizophrenia that I call, being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture. In some sense we're not Mexican and in some sense we're not American.¹⁹

¹⁵ My thesis includes discussions of Mexican literature and popular culture. For this reason, many of the quotations are presented in Spanish. A small quotation or word is translated in parenthesis in the main text. For longer quotations, I have decided to include the translation in a footnote.

¹⁶ The concept of liminality is investigated by Victor W. Turner in *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969). According to Turner, 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; there are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. [...] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.' (p. 95) For the use of this concept in literature see Perez-Firmat's *Literature and Liminality. Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986). Perez-Firmat investigates how liminal concepts such as carnival, *choteo* (joking) and disease are represented in some Hispanic literary texts.

¹⁷ Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition. Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁸ Elena Poniatowska, 'Mexicanas and Chicanas', *MELUS*, 21:3 (1996), 35-51 (p. 37).

¹⁹ Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda, p. 66.

Another key concept related with liminality and that addresses Chicanos/as' attempt to build a new identity is transculturation.²⁰ Mary Louise Pratt states that this term illustrates 'how subordinate or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.'²¹ Vivian Schelling and William Rowe claim transculturation 'is concerned with the mutual transformation of cultures [...].'²² These processes are most apparent in chapter four where I discuss the ways in which Mexican immigrants re-read Catholic symbols and popular culture icons in order to contest the dominant.

Another way of addressing Chicanos/as' liminal and complex identity has been proposed by Gloria Anzaldúa. For her to adopt a *mestiza* consciousness implies 'developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity'²³ that will enable the individual to embrace not a unique identity, but multiple ones. The *mestiza* does not have to choose a culture since she is 'participating in the creation of yet another culture [...].'(p. 81) Although Anzaldúa's idealization of the *mestiza* figure is attempting to challenge political, sexual and gendered dichotomies, scholars such as Jean-Luc Nancy warn against the oversimplification of this concept. Nancy argues that *mestizaje* is a very complex idea: '[it] is always a very long, vast and obscure story. It is such a slow process that no one can see it happening.'²⁴ Thus, Nancy concludes 'it should not be turned into a new substance, a new identity' (p. 123). This philosopher not only draws attention to the overuse of this term in cultural studies, but also to the idea that *mestizaje* only involves the crossing of two cultures in a particular historical moment. Rowe and Schelling also warn against the risks of

²⁰ The term 'transculturation' is increasingly being used in the Latino/a/Chicano/a cultural studies. See for instance Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, *Stages of Life. Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001)

²¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

²² William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 18

²³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 79.

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Cut Throat Sun', in *An Other Tongue. Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. by Alfred Arteaga (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 113-23 (p. 122).

idealizing this concept and articulating it as 'an ideology of racial harmony which obscures the actual holding of power by a particular group.' (p. 18) The idea that Chicanos/as are influenced by both Mexican and Anglo-American cultures is seen in chapter three, as the children's stories that inform their work are not only folk stories but also mainstream tales such as *The Wizard of Oz* and Rapunzel.

This thesis contributes to the expanding critical work of Chicano/a literary and cultural studies by focusing on themes and directions that have not been developed to the extent they deserve. I argue that aspects of Chicano/a cultural identity are called into question regarding the extent to which they relate to present-day Chicanos/as from all backgrounds. Thus, symbols and practices belonging to Mexican/Chicano/a culture are examined and revitalized through the inclusion of issues such as feminism and (homo)sexuality. The foundations of Chicanidad such as the figure of Virgin of Guadalupe or the mythical symbol of Aztlán, believed to be unalterable, are revamped in order to relate to Chicanos/as. For reasons of clarity, this thesis divides these aspects of Chicano/a cultural identity into four areas: Chicano/a history and mythology, Catholicism, children's tales and popular culture. I examine how the sexist, homophobic and nationalist dimensions of these four themes are revised and destabilized. Believing that certain cultural forms such as folk stories or myths comply with the dominant ideology and persuade women to remain passive agents, Chicano/a writers revise them, investing them with a more empowering meaning. Cultural icons such as La Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe are thus updated and transformed into contestatory symbols. Aspects of popular culture such as the *telenovela*, which tend to be regarded as merely entertaining and even degrading, are re-charged with a positive significance, addressing the potential of resistance in such cultural forms. Often, the era in which certain myths were created is investigated and thus history is re-written from a women's perspective.

Although some of the subjects studied herein have been analysed previously, I believe the four themes are better appreciated when considered together, rather than independently. These four areas form the foundations of Chicano/a cultural identity and thus to reconfigure one, involves the revision of another.

Since it is mainly the female writers who are dedicated to revise their cultural heritage, most of the writers studied in this thesis are Chicanas. I have included in my discussion the work of Chicanos such as Richard Rodríguez and John Rechy as they are authors who are calling into question the pedestals of Chicanidad, such as political identification and heterosexuality. Even though this thesis concentrates on Chicano/a literature, I have included the work of the Mexican writer Maria Amparo Escandón. This writer has lived in the United States for fifteen years and explores in her novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* how Mexican immigrants invest Mexican popular culture with a resistant significance. For these reasons I feel it necessary to incorporate her work in my study.

The terminology employed in this work needs to be clarified. I use the term 'Chicano/a' to refer to the population of Mexican descent living in the United States. 'Chicano/a' tends to connote ethnic pride and political commitment. Pérez-Torres argues that within academic institutions, this term 'represents a type of cultural affirmation and critical stance toward dominant Euramerican society.' (p. 19) I sometimes interchange the term 'Chicano/a' with 'Mexican-American' although the latter can imply a degree of assimilation. Many of the Chicano/a writers analysed in this work discuss the experiences of Latinos/as rather than only Chicanos/as. I employ the term 'Latino/a' to describe the population of Latin American origins residing in the United States.²⁵

²⁵ Suzanne Oboler states that the word 'Latino' is believed to be 'a progressive alternative to the state-imposed bureaucratic label Hispanic.' (pp. vii-viii) The term Hispanic is 'an artifact created and imposed by state administrative agencies.' (p. xv) In *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives. Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

The first chapter has two aims. Firstly, it maps the field of Chicano/a literary studies by providing a discussion of the origins of Chicano/a literature to its present state. Secondly, it begins to discuss the revisionist direction of Chicano/a literature by analysing the ways in which history and mythology are reconceived. The chapter explores the inception of Chicano/a literature and its connection with the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The literature produced during this time was linked to, and reflected, the socio-political agenda of the movement. However, the nationalist ideology and essentialist notions heralded at the time by Chicano writers and leaders are nowadays questioned and criticised. Chicanas, marginalized during the movement, revise the over-used mythical indigenous gods and concept of Aztlán and highlight its patriarchal dimension. They respond to the representations by providing a woman-oriented *indigenismo* and vision of history. Even though, some Chicanas' indigenist work reproduces Chicanos' ideology as they also glorify indigenous goddesses and articulate essentialist ideas.

This chapter then discusses some of the pressures and problems currently faced nowadays by Chicano/a writers. On the one hand, they are expected by the mainstream to provide a commodified writing that resembles the magic realism trend of Latin American literature, whilst on the other hand, the movement and the nationalist direction of the early literature pressurizes writers to offer a community-oriented writing. Those writers that do not follow such mandates are accused by some critics of not being sufficiently committed to the community or not being 'authentically Chicano/a'. The recent work of authors such as Michelle Serros responds to these expectations by lampooning the notion that Chicano/a writing has to deal with 'authentic' themes such as *barrio* or gang related experiences. Since this is a thorny subject, Chicano/a critical studies rarely discuss the pressures felt by Chicano/a writers to provide an *authentic* writing or determined image of the

community. Thus, I intend to expand the critical debate surrounding this subject, focusing on texts that respond to essentialist notions of ethnicity. The notion of an authentic or disloyal Chicano/a writer re-appears in other chapters of this thesis as many writers or artists that reconfigure traditional icons and artforms are criticized for being disrespectful towards their culture.

The second chapter addresses an important aspect of Chicano/a cultural identity that is, Catholicism. This chapter aims to describe how Chicanas question and contest the roles assigned to women within the Catholic realm. I start by examining Latino Catholicism and its linguistic and socio-political specificities, and how they differ from those of Euro-American Catholicism. I then focus my attention on the main figure of Mexican/Chicano Catholicism, the Virgin of Guadalupe before addressing the literary re-articulations that this figure has undergone. Focusing on the historical circumstances surrounding the icon since Spanish colonization, I provide an analysis of the Virgin of Guadalupe's origins. The re-symbolization of the Virgin of Guadalupe in literature and art epitomizes Chicanas' willingness to embrace their culture as long as it revised. Unable to identify with a submissive religious icon, Chicanas re-write the Virgin of Guadalupe in a way that she represents an empowering racial symbol. My work shows how the re-articulations of this icon by writers such as Sandra Cisneros bring to light not only the indigenous goddesses from which she descends, but also the racial and sexualised aspects of her identity. I then analyse two novels, Ana Castillo's *So far From God* and Maria Helena Viramontes' *Under the Feet of God*, since they express a discrepancy with the Catholic Church's mandates and a willingness to revise them. Thus, both texts address the need to question and re-write significant Catholic symbols and concepts such as martyrdom and sainthood in order to reflect Chicanas' socio-political circumstances.

The influence and presence of folk and fairy tales in Chicana literature is the focus of the third chapter. I begin by discussing the manner in which canonical children's and fairy tales such as *Red Riding Hood* and *Alice in Wonderland* are incorporated into Chicana narratives of childhood. I study the play *Alice in Wonder Tierra* by Silvia González, focusing on how it re-writes the classical children's tales *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The re-articulation of these texts allows the writer to explore issues of origins and ethnic identity. *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* suggests that Chicano/a children's (and by implication immigrants' children) acknowledgment of their (bicultural) origins and their 'home' (Mexico and United States) is not as straightforward as presented in the mainstream tales. My thesis draws attention to this practically unknown writer by discussing her original and innovative approach when dealing with Chicanos/as' cultural identity and the idea of home. My analysis discusses the work of cultural theorists such as Salman Rushdie and fairy tale scholars such as Jack Zipes. The latter section of this chapter concentrates on the relevance of the Mexican folk tale La Llorona, the weeping woman. The icon of La Llorona is extensively incorporated in Chicana literature, demonstrating a discrepancy between the ways in which women are represented in Mexican folklore. Although this figure is reconfigured in numerous ways, she is generally posited as an empowering role model, rather than as a murderous mother. I maintain that in some texts she is interpreted as the bogeywoman of a patriarchal society. Thus, I explain how writers such as Monica Palacios and Gloria Anzaldúa re-signify La Llorona as a lesbian woman or a wife who rejects her husband.

The fourth and final chapter discusses the re-articulation of icons from Mexican popular culture by Chicano/a writers. I discuss the relevance of the *telenovela*, the soap opera, in constructing a Chicana cultural identity. This artform is rarely analysed within Chicano/a literary studies as it is dismissed as a televised form. My

work argues that the *telenovela* has a more significant meaning by discussing texts which provide a multi-faceted view and which focus on its transnational aspect. The processes of transformation undergone by other popular cultural figures (such as a Mexican wrestler and the saint of illegal immigrants) are also studied, reflecting the many layers of meaning implicit in seemingly entertaining and passive icons.

Although I have intended for each chapter to deal with a specific subject matter, certain themes and ideas overlap and reappear. For example, the subject of Catholic saints, which is analysed in the first chapter, re-emerges in the last. Although this thesis concentrates on the contemporary Chicano/a literary production, an interdisciplinary approach allows a more comprehensive analysis. For this reason, my literary analysis is supported by material belonging to sociology, history, cinema and the visual arts. One of this thesis' contributions lies in revealing the similarity between Chicano/a writing's and visual art's socio-political project. Chicana visual art also explores the means to create a transcultural identity. Thus, the inclusion of a study of certain aspects of Chicana visual arts supports and complements the arguments presented in this thesis.

Chapter 1: Re-defining the Chicano/a Canon and New Directions in Chicano/a Literature

'We must present a strong and real imagery of ourselves, not a pseudopyramided idiocy peopled by facile, docile, and benign plastic indígenas [...].'¹

"'You know what you are?
A Chicana Falsa.'"²

This chapter comprises two sections. The first aims to map the field of Chicano/a literary study and identify its most relevant socio-political and cultural directions. This section concentrates on discussing the origins of Chicano/a literature and its link with the Chicano movement. The second section begins to explore the ways in which Chicano/a culture is revised in literature by focusing on Mexican/Chicano/a history and mythology. Disagreeing with the male- and nationalist- oriented literature of the 1960s and 1970s, Chicano and especially Chicana writers re-articulate their past from alternative perspectives. This revisionist approach also involves the re-creation of indigenous figures and symbols such as La Malinche and Aztlán from a feminist point of view. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chicano/a literature presented a variety of experiences and views on aspects such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, community and tradition. Instead of presenting a homogenized representation of Chicano/a identity, this literature offered and continued to offer, very diverse reflections on issues such as nationalism. But, the distancing of a community- and nationalist-oriented writing in favour of a more personal writing has started a debate regarding the authenticity of certain Chicano/a authors. Therefore, I review the critical debate surrounding the subject of ethnic authenticity and expand it by discussing works that tackle this theme in original ways. The notion of producing an *authentic* Chicano/a writing permeates into the other three chapters as the re-creation of certain traditional

¹ Juan Bruce-Novoa, 'Interview with Ricardo Sánchez', in *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), pp. 219-34 (p. 231).

² Michele Serros, *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity and Oxnard* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 1.

icons and forms is viewed by some critics as a disloyal attitude towards the community.

At present, Chicano/a writers such as Rudolfo Anaya and Gloria Anzaldúa have entered the syllabus courses of university degrees in not only the United States, but also in Europe. The incorporation of minorities' writing into the U.S. literary field has inevitably modified it, leading to a reconfiguration of the concept of 'U.S. literature' and 'U.S. literary canon'. The changes taking place in literary canons are generally welcomed and deemed as positive, but they also provoke negative reactions such as those articulated by the critic Harold Bloom:

Pragmatically, the "expansion of the Canon" has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity. There is no strangeness and no originality in such resentment; even if there were, they would not suffice to create heirs of the Yahwist and Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Joyce.³

Although ethnic minorities' resentment may carry 'no originality', it contains a different historical and cultural background from that of the canonical writers and thus needs to be addressed by contemporary cultural production. But, what is particularly interesting is the fact that the 'expansion of the Canon', as used by Harold Bloom, involves the creation of another canon, the Chicano canon itself, not devoid of similar discussions around the content of the privileged texts that enter it. Which works are considered worth entering the 'Chicano/a canon'? Why are some texts deemed *authentically* Chicano/a and others not? Does a Chicano/a writer have to deal with themes such as ethnicity or community in order to enter the Chicano/a canon? These matters must be considered when examining how Chicano/a culture is revised, as the incorporation of issues such as (homo)sexuality incites much debate.

It is commonly believed that early Chicano/a literature was linked to and dictated by the socio-political concerns of the Chicano movement. It is my intention to demonstrate that the mandates and foundations of the movement still influence the

³ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 7.

content and direction of the literary body of work produced today. I will show how a new body of writing is responding to these views by articulating a Chicano/a subjectivity that does not place emphasis on nationalism or community, the pedestals of the movement. Although the literary group that emerged from the Chicano movement has been regarded as a coherent and united group, dissensions among them existed. Even though many writers expressed their disagreement with the indigenist and nationalist direction of the literature, it is mainly now that a strong critical stance is taken towards the movement and the writing that emerged from this period. During the past years, a critical production has arisen that examines the ideological contradictions and flaws of the movement's agenda. Many of these critical voices arise from Chicanas, who reject the patriarchal tendency of the movement. It is my intention to review this critical material that expresses a disapproving attitude on the literature produced during the movement. Female writers have been critical of the marginalisation of women during the movement and of their clichéd portrayal in the cultural production. As a result, they have also adopted a revisionist attitude towards indigenous female figures such as La Malinche or Aztec goddesses. As I will demonstrate, some of this re-visioning has also fallen into a simplistic re-appropriation devoid of historical and socio-political contextualisation, analogous to the much-criticized male indigenism.

I will also focus on the recent success that Chicano/a writing is experiencing. The commodification of this literature as exotic and accessible to readers from all ethnic backgrounds is a significant problem that needs to be addressed. I will discuss novels that participate in the common portrayal of the Chicano/a/Latino/a population as exotic and mysterious.

Critics such as Juan Bruce-Novoa and Wilson Neate have examined the existence of a Chicano/a literary canon dictated by the movement's nationalist

agenda.⁴ But I want to expand this discussion by the incorporation of the analysis of recent writers such as Michelle Serros and Richard Rodríguez whose work questions essentialist notions of ethnicity. These Chicano/a authors poke fun at the idea of an authentic Chicano/a subjectivity and literature and can thus be interpreted, once again, as a response to the movement's ideology. As this is a complex issue, Chicano/a studies do not deal with this theme sufficiently. This chapter addresses the need to expand critical discussions regarding the pressures felt by Chicano/a writers to deal with certain themes and to provide a positive image of the community. Although most of the writers examined in this thesis have entered the Chicano/a canon, two writers, Richard Rodríguez and John Rechy, remain outside. By including them in this thesis, I suggest that they should be allowed entrance in the canon, as their views and ideas enrich Chicano/a literature.

The Chicano movement

Critics such as Juan Bruce-Novoa have expressed in no uncertain terms the link between the movement and the beginnings of Chicano/a literature: 'That the early Chicano/a literary production was closely intertwined with the socio-political Movement is clear.'⁵ For this reason, I will begin by providing an overview of the movement (also known as *La Causa*) focusing on its cultural and socio-political direction.

⁴ Juan Bruce-Novoa, 'Introduction', in *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview*, pp. 3-33; Wilson Neate, *Tolerating Ambiguity: Ethnicity and Community in Chicano/a Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

⁵ Bruce-Novoa, 'Introduction', in *Chicano Authors* (p. 9). Wilson Neate expresses a similar view: 'A crucial function of the Movement was its catalysing effect on literary production, particularly poetry and drama. [These genres] evolved in conjunction with the Movement, as expressions of activism and as forums for that very activism.' In 'Chicano Literature', in *Encyclopaedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 190-193 (p. 190). Francisco Lomell also argues that '[...] the Movement and the literary component became closely intertwined symbiotically as two parts of the same as they nurtured the other.' In 'Contemporary Chicano Literature, 1959-1990: From Oblivion to Affirmation to the Forefront', in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art*, ed. by Francisco Lomell, 4 vols (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), pp. 86-108 (p. 90).

The term 'Chicano movement' stands for a variety of activities and endeavours lead by the Chicano/a population to obtain recognition in Unites States' society and to attain a cultural and historical consciousness. Because of the different directions of this movement, vagueness and misunderstanding have pervaded for years. The *Dictionary of Mexican American History* defines the movement this way: ' [...] a vaguely defined, amorphous concept to cover all the activities of Chicanos in their effort to achieve consciousness and separate identity.'⁶ Carlos Muñoz has attempted to get rid of all imprecision and ambiguities surrounding the movement in his account entitled *Youth, Identity, Power. The Chicano Movement*. Muñoz describes it as a 'counter-hegemonic struggle' that among many objectives, '[...] opposed racial, political and patriarchal domination and economic exploitation; [...] it called for the expansion of the democratic process and individual rights for Mexican-Americans; and it emphasized direct political action.'⁷ Although the lack of socio-political and economic power by the Chicano/a population was a major force in the birth of the movement, other factors such as the black civil rights movement influenced its creation. Muñoz identifies the students' activism in the 1960s as a major factor in the development of the movement although he acknowledges the vital role of other groups. Mario Barrera points towards the civil rights movement, affirmative action programmes and political changes in Washington as events that also participated in the origins of the Chicano movement.⁸

Suzanne Oboler distinguishes two different directions taken by the movement.⁹ On one hand, the rural struggle incorporated the farmworkers movement led by

⁶ Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Dictionary of Mexican American History* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 239.

⁷ Carlos Muñoz, Jr, *The Chicano Movement. Youth, Identity, Power* (London, New York: Verso, 1989), p. 16.

⁸ Mario Barrera, *Beyond Aztlán: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1988). This critic also discusses Chicano organizations that were important precursors of the movement.

⁹ It is not my intention to give an exhaustive description of the Chicano movement. The texts on which I am basing my analysis should be referred to for a more complete analysis. I am basing my

César Chávez which intended to put an end to the poverty experienced by rural Chicanos/as as well as fight for the rights of immigrant labourers in the fields. Carlos Muñoz states that Chávez found an enormous backing since most Mexican Americans had been farmworkers at some time in their lives. Another direction was taken by Reies López Tijerina's movement which fought to re-appropriate lands taken from the Mexican community as a result of the Mexican-American War.¹⁰ Tijerina became another important leader of the movement. According to Rodolfo Acuña, Tijerina 'represented a prophet who would deliver the lands back to their rightful owners [...] To young people he represented a mixture of Don Quixote and Ché.' (p. 241)

On the other hand, the movement had an urban focused strand, which aimed to address the issues concerning the majority of Chicanos/as, that is, those living in cities. Oboler identifies the Chicano Power Movement (led by Rodolfo Corky Gonzáles) and La Raza Unida party (led by José A. Gutierrez) as the two different political directions taken by this line. Muñoz claims that student activism could not relate completely to the struggle of farmworkers even though Chávez had become a national leader. In 1965, Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzáles founded the Crusade for Justice, a Mexican-American civil rights organization that prepared the path for the creation of the Chicano Power Movement.¹¹ The Crusade, according to Muñoz, 'came to symbolize Chicano self-determination and espoused a strong nationalist ideology that militant youth found extremely attractive.' (p. 75) In Denver, the Crusade for Justice

discussion on the work of Mario Barrera, Carlos Muñoz, Suzanne Oboler and Rodolfo Acuña. Rodolfo Acuña. *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).

¹⁰ See Oboler's work for a more detailed account of Reies López Tijerina's socio-political goal, pp. 61-64.

¹¹ Acuña explains the importance of this leader among the Chicano youth. Corky Gonzáles was 'the most influential Chicano leader among the youth—students and *barrio batos* [...]. [He] represents the frustrations of the *bato* and *barrio* youth, who have been so mesmerized by the public schools that they suffer from a mental block in speaking Spanish. [...] The school menaces them. Corky understands this, and he understands the loss of identity when the Anglo teacher changes one's name from Rodolfo to Rudolph, when one is punished for speaking Spanish, and he understands the fight against marginality.' (p. 241)

hosted a National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in March 1969, assembling people from all social backgrounds. The conference proclaimed nationalism as a uniting and driving force for Chicanos/as as well as laying emphasis on the role of students and youth as protagonists in the movement. As Muñoz explains, a new identity was being forged that was founded on symbols of Mexican culture and a renunciation of Anglo-American culture. The decisions reached in the conference were put in writing in a document entitled *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* which was embraced by the attendants as the foundation of their political ideology. The African-American fight for human rights and Third World countries' national liberation struggles influenced this new generation who began to look back to their own history of colonization. At the second youth conference in Santa Barbara, students decided they should abandon the specific campus or regional names of associations, and become *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*, MEChA. The student movement not only fought against the absence of academic interest in the Mexican-American community but it was also involved in social and political issues affecting non-students.

La Raza Unida party was founded by José Angel Gutiérrez in 1970 according to Suzanne Oboler, in an attempt to '[...] institutionalise Chicano students' demands in nationalist political terms and on a nationwide basis [...]' (p. 67) Carlos Muñoz maintains that the party merely endorsed the 'gringo as enemy' concept and avoided expanding their political ideology. By 1972, internal disagreements and a lack of community support meant the end of the party.

It is understandable that the diversity of groups, plans, conferences, and leaders make it difficult to encapsulate the ideology of the movement. For instance, Muñoz points out the flawed tendency to signal the farmworkers' head Cesar Chávez as the leader of the movement. He argues that 'In fact, Chávez has been and remains the

leader of a labor movement and later a union struggle that was never an integral part of the Chicano movement.'(p. 7) Muñoz also remarks that it is commonly assumed that all members of the movement embraced a nationalist ideology but as he notes, neither Chávez nor Reies López Tijerina supported nationalism. (p. 7)

The marginal position of Chicanas and the lack of women leaders within the movement also threatened the image of the movement as unitary and cohesive, although this matter did not receive much attention at the time.¹² Despite the ambitious and promising project devised by the movement, the liberation of Chicanas was not one of its goals. As Cynthia Orozco clearly puts it: 'It must be clear that this movement did *not* attempt to end patriarchy, the system by which men dominate women.'(p. 11) In her article 'The Role of the Chicana Within the Student Movement', Sonia A. López talks about Chicanas' failed attempts to introduce women's issues in the movement's conferences and activities:

The Chicanas who voiced their discontent with the organizations and with male leadership were often labeled as "women's libbers," and "lesbians". This served to isolate and discredit them, a method practiced both covertly and overtly. In the more politically advanced M.E.Ch.A. organizations, lip service to Chicana demands and needs were given, and a "selected few" Chicanas were given leaderships positions in organizations, boards, and committees. Yet in practice the men continued to be the "jefes" [bosses] in decision making policies and political direction.¹³

López believes the lack of support for Chicanas' issues was due to misconceptions and misinformation about the oppressed position of Chicanas and the assumption that embracing the women's movement would entail not only to view men as the enemy but also a rejection of one's roots.

¹² This matter has been raised in numerous articles and books. See Cynthia Orozco, 'Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community' in *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race and Gender* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), pp.11-15; *Chicana Feminist Thought. The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. by Alma M. García (New York, London: Routledge, 1997); Vicki L. Ruiz, 'La Nueva Chicana: Women and the Movement', in *From Out of the Shadows. Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

¹³ Sonia López, 'The Role of the Chicana Within the Student Movement', in *Chicana Feminist Thought. The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. by García, pp. 100-06 (p. 105).

Indigenism: revitalizing the indigenous past

The passive and marginal role undertaken by women in the movement is specially reflected in the indigenist ideology embraced during this period. It is mainly during the past decade that an important number of articles have appeared drawing attention to the contradictions and inconsistencies of indigenism that were overlooked at the time. In order to store a sense of ethnic pride in the Chicano/a, indigenism was revitalized as a forceful influence by the cultural nationalists leaders. The Chicanos/as' search for origins led them to the resurgence and glorification of a pre-Columbian past.¹⁴

This ideology is best exemplified in the revival of the myth of Aztlán, the homeland of the Aztecs. According to the Nahuatl myth, the Aztecs abandoned Aztlán in search of the promised land in 820A.D. After a journey of two centuries they eventually recognized their destined region by a sign: an eagle sitting on a cactus with a serpent in its beak. This way, Aztlán adopts a nostalgic meaning as the paradisiacal land of origins, the Mexican Garden of Eden. Since this mythical location is situated in what used to be the north of Mexico, Chicanos/as of the Southwestern United States are supposedly inhabitants of Aztlán. Luis Leal claims that Aztlán, as a symbol, has a historical and spiritual signification:

[...] first it represents the geographic region known as the Southwestern part of the United States, composed of the territory that Mexico ceded in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; second, and more important, Aztlán symbolized the spiritual union of the Chicanos, something that is carried within the heart, no matter where they may live or where they may find themselves.¹⁵

The concept of Aztlán was first presented in 'El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán', in the Chicano Youth Conference in 1969: 'We are a bronze people with a bronze

¹⁴ Regina Harrison makes a distinction between the term Indianism and Indigenism: 'Indianism, a term invoked to distinguish the romantic depiction of native American peoples, contrasts with Indigenism, a term coined to describe a more realistic assessment of native peoples within a national setting.' In 'Indianism in Spanish America', in *Encyclopaedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith, pp. 439-40. In my work, I use the term 'Indigenism' to refer to the revitalization of pre-Columbian history and culture, usually involving romantic connotations.

¹⁵ Luis Leal, 'In Search of Aztlán', in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, ed. by Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomeli (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 6-13 (p. 8).

culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are *Aztlán*.¹⁶ The notion of *Aztlán* articulated Chicanos/as as a colonized group with rights to reclaim their lost land, ignoring the actual geographical borders. This symbol was quickly embraced by the population as an empowering and uniting concept. It provided a distinct cultural and historical background from that of Anglo-America and connected the Chicano/a individual with a honourable race.¹⁷ The poet Alurista is particularly representative of this indigenist tendency to revive the myth of *Aztlán* as will be seen later in the chapter. This political symbol is still expressed in recent cultural productions, revealing, according to Daniel Cooper Alarcón, that '[...] ironically [it] has proven to be more durable than the movement that reappropriated and reconstructed it.' (p. 51) It was precisely the vagueness and romantization of a distant past that was going to undermine the political value of this concept. Elyette Andouart-Labarthe argues that the Marxist branch of the movement disagreed with the nostalgic representation of the original land: '[...] *Aztlán* disregarded dialectics, promised a world devoid of contradictions in which things seemed to fit together as if by magic.'¹⁸

Along with the revival of *Aztlán*, came the recovery of Aztec male gods and warriors, an indication that this symbolic space was read in solely patriarchal terms. The historical approach of the pre-Columbian past conveniently ignored vital facts with respects to class and gender stratification in order to fit the nationalist idea that a recognition of an indigenous background equalled ethnic pride. Another problem inherent to the indigenist move was that it overlooked important facts that

¹⁶ 'El Plan Espiritual de *Aztlán*', *Aztlán*, 1:1 (1970), p. iv.

¹⁷ See Daniel Cooper Alarcón's article where he reveals how the myth of *Aztlán* has been manipulated by different authors in order to convene a specific geographical location that suits different political claims. 'The Aztec Palimpsest: Toward a New Understanding of *Aztlán*, Cultural Identity and History', *Aztlán*, 19:2 (1988-90), pp. 33-68.

¹⁸ Elyette Andouart-Labarthe, 'The Vicissitudes of *Aztlán*', *Confluencia: Revista Hispánica de Cultura y Literatura*, 5:2 (1990), 79-84, (p. 82).

contradicted the idea of pre-Columbian populations as virtuous and humane. This point has been taken up by numerous Chicano/a critics and writers such as Genaro Padilla who in his article 'Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism' ironically questions the Chicano/a nationalist's description of the Aztecs as a peaceful and righteous people: 'One has to wonder just where this utopian tribe of Aztecas was residing when other tribes were being slaughtered by the militaristic Aztecs.'¹⁹ These nostalgic recuperations of historical symbols find resonance in Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation where the duplication of an original model entails the obsolescence of the latter:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.²⁰

Mike Davis also argues that the return to origins overlooked a complex cultural background that included diverse ethnic groups such as the Olmecs, Tarascans or Zapotecs.²¹ Also, the magnification of a native descent simplified the Chicanos/as' past to a predominant historical period. This is the argument presented by writer Ricardo Sánchez in an interview with Juan Bruce-Novoa: 'If we are part indian, then let us affirm all nuances of our indian-ness, [...] Let us affirm lo español y gitano [the spanish and gypsy] of our reality [...].'²² This is also the argument of J. Jorge Klor de Alva who states that 'This indigenous side to the Chicano roots is often exaggerated, to the point of completely eclipsing the more pervasive influences of the Spanish and Anglo-American cultures.'²³ These critics and writers criticize how

¹⁹ Genaro Padilla, 'Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism', in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, pp. 111-34 (p. 117). See also Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen. Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotexte, 1983), p. 12.

²¹ Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism. Latinos Reinvent the US City* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), p. 17.

²² Juan Bruce-Novoa, 'Interview with Ricardo Sánchez' in *Chicano Authors. Inquiry by Interviews*, p. 233.

²³ J. Jorge Klor de Alva, 'Chicano Philosophy', in *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide*, ed. by Julio A. Martínez and Francisco A. Lomeli (Westport: Greenport Press, 1985), pp. 148-161 (p. 152).

the recuperation of Chicanos/as' history involved remembering certain periods and civilizations, whilst conveniently ignoring others.

The revitalization of the indigenous past also entails a glorification of male Aztec icons as well as clichéd and one-dimensional representations of women. Vicki L. Ruiz puts it this way: 'What roles could women play in this hagiography of a pre-Columbian past? [...] Light-complexed women dressed in translucent gowns held in the arms of muscular bronze men arrayed in gold and feathers.'²⁴ Positive and empowering portrayals of indigenous women such as La Malinche had to wait until the 1980s and 1990s to appear in feminist revisionist works.

Although the pre-Columbian lineage was strongly underlined among the nationalist revisions of the Chicanos/as' past, cultural nationalists also tried to revive significant Mexican historical figures such as Emilio Zapata in order to invest a positive Chicano/a subjectivity. This idea is exemplified in the epic poem *I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín* by Rodolfo Corky Gonzáles. Originally a leaflet circulated during the movement years, *I am Joaquín* intended to make the Chicano/a individual aware of his/her own history by drawing attention to eminent figures to which s/he could relate. In the introduction to the book, Gonzáles states that his text intends to uncover '[...] the truth about our own flaws – the villains and the heroes had to ride together - in order to draw an honest, clear conclusion of who we were, who we are, and where we are going.'²⁵ Gonzáles traces Joaquín, a Chicano 'lost in a world of confusion [...] and destroyed by modern society' to empowering historical figures ranging from Cuahatemoc to Pancho Villa. Since Gonzáles claims to expose 'the villains and the heroes' belonging to the protagonist's and by implication the Chicano/a's ancestry, the narrator, Joaquín, acknowledges descent from figures such

²⁴ Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows. Mexican Women in the Twentieth-Century America*, p. 106. See also Lara Medina's 'Los espíritus siguen hablando: Chicana Spiritualities', in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), pp. 189-213.

²⁵ Rodolfo Corky Gonzáles, 'Introduction', in *I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 1.

as the Spanish conquistadors, the landowners and the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz: 'I was both tyrant and slave' (p. 19). This way, the author avoids reducing the protagonist's descent to just the (benevolent) Mexican line, and addresses the hybrid and complex background inherent to a history of colonization. The text implies that unless the Chicano/a comes to terms with his/her compounded historical and cultural background, s/he will not be able to attain a self-respecting subjectivity. Despite recognizing a multifaceted lineage and being a landmark work of the movement, *I am Joaquín* is a text that has been criticised for its facile statements. Although the narrator includes women in the set of icons that forms Joaquín's cultural heritage, their representation is restricted to passive and submissive figures such as a 'black-shawled faithful women' (p. 42), or the Virgin of Guadalupe. Rosa Linda Fregoso expands on this:

The males who inform Chicano cultural identity have names (Cuahtemoc, Juan Diego, and so on), but the females are nameless abstractions. Indeed, as opposed to appearing as historical subjects, women are positioned as the metaphors for the emotive side of Chicano collective cultural identity, as "faithful" wives or "suffering" Mexican mothers.²⁶

The promising project of addressing Chicanos/as' complex and inspirational history is undermined by Gonzáles' reductive treatment of female figures.²⁷ With regards to the handling of indigenous history, Fregoso remarks that the text '[...] mystified and ignored the stratified nature of pre-Columbian society, a reality of the Chicano indigenous past whose idealization soon became untenable, even as a strategic affront to racism.' (p. 48) Bruce-Novoa also criticizes this text, expressing the idealistic way in which violence is represented: 'It stressed a tradition of

²⁶ Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen*, p. 6. Fregoso links her criticism of Gonzales' text with that of the film *Yo Soy Chicano*, written and produced by Jesús Salvador Treviño and directed by Barry Nye. This documentary, according to Fregoso, also attempts to expose the Chicanos/as' past by concentrating on icons such as Zapata and contemporary leaders. She notes that the representation of Dolores Huerta, the vice president of the United Farmworkers' Union, remains reductive: '[...] woman becomes an abstract embodiment: the metaphor for Mother Earth and for masculine desire.' (p. 12)

²⁷ Gonzáles's cultural plan is also debilitated by the presence of a flawed translation, and multiple mistakes in the Spanish version that accompanies each poem. For instance, 'le [sic] corona española' (p. 19); 'peléo' [sic] (p. 60); 'Free from Spanish rule' is wrongly translated as 'libre de regla hispana' (p. 27).

shedding blood for the struggle, glorifies it and extends that tradition into the need for contemporary militants prepared to shed more blood to continue the struggle.²⁸

The faults for which *I am Joaquín* is criticized - male orientated perspective and a tendency to simplify a compounded historical background - embody the ideological contradictions that the movement sustained. Although indigenism helped the creation of an enriched sense of identity, the appropriation of a culture which was very distant from the reality of the majority of urban Chicanos/as is itself a problematic move. During the succeeding years, critics have expanded on the motives that led to the decay of this ideology among Chicanos/as. According to Genaro Padilla, the return to a mythic past 'risk[s] of falling into the mire exoticism and an attendant retreat into inaction [...]' (p. 127), precisely the opposite response expected from the movement's leaders. Similarly, Arthur Ramírez reveals that '[...] after a while, indigenism among Chicanos seemed to fade, the trend became a self-parody, the distortions too excessive to even possibly serve as a legitimate trend, much less as a possible path toward a return to authenticity.'²⁹

But the Chicano nationalist movement is not the only ethnic or colonized group to have revived a distant past in the name of national liberation and ethnic pride. In his article 'Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism', Genaro Padilla compares the Chicano/a resurrection of native traditions with the idealization of a mythic past by the Irish nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁰ Once we consider, as Lavie and Swedenburg argue, that 'Minorities and national liberation

²⁸ Juan Bruce-Novoa, 'Chicano Literary Production, 1960-1980', in *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature. Theory and History* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990), p. 77.

²⁹ Arthur Ramírez, 'Feminist Neo-Indigenism in Chicana Aztlán', in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 7:4 (1995), pp. 70-78 (p. 73). For a critique of the indigenist ideology among Chicano/a political and cultural manifestations, see also Benjamin Alire Sáenz, 'In the Borderlands of Identity, There Are Only Fragments', in *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, ed. by Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp. 68-96; Charles Yves Grangjeat, 'Nationalism, History and Myth: the Masks of Aztlán', *Confluencia*, 6:1 (1990), pp. 19-27.

³⁰ In his article 'Myth and Comparative Cultural Nationalism', Padilla compares the ways in which William Butler Yeats and Luis Valdez attempted to install a sense of national identity by intertwining the mystical and political in their writings.

movements often appropriate ethnographic essentialism as a strategy to authenticate their own experience [...],³¹ the Chicano/a return to a native identity does not seem very original. In fact, Chicano/a nationalist leaders are not the first to recuperate and exalt Mexican origins. In Mexico, during the post-revolutionary era, intellectuals and artists adopted indigenism in order to minimise and scorn European cultural influences. Joanne Hershfield maintains that although indigenism aimed to understand the role of Indians in Mexican culture, '[...] its champions often failed to acknowledge linguistic, historical, and cultural differences, and even variations in racial stock among the diverse groups that made up Mexico's indigenous population.'³² Hershfield even believes that the ambiguity created by this supposedly uncomplicated origins may be responsible for Mexico's ongoing search for a national identity. The internal differences within the Mexican native population were ignored once again by the Chicano cultural nationalists for the sake of political unity.

Another fault for which the Chicano/a indigenist ideology has been criticized is its superficial admiration for the Indian population and culture. The glorification of indigenous peoples limited itself to pre-Columbian populations rather than addressing the reality of present-day Indian peoples. In an interview with Juan Bruce-Novoa, the poet Ricardo Sánchez criticizes how certain movement members praised indigenous cultures whilst ignored the very real concerns of Indian and Chicano/a populations. He angrily states: 'No, there are no pyramids nor fancy ideas at the Navajo nation, just as our barrios are not beautiful nor edifying.'³³ The hypocrisy implicit in romanticizing indigenous cultures while ignoring the socio-economic problems of existing Indian populations also takes place in Mexico where

³¹ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, 'Introduction', in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, ed. by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 1-25, (p. 12).

³² Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), p. 50.

³³ 'Interview with Ricardo Sanchez', in *Chicano Authors*, p. 233.

the poor conditions in which the Mixtecs live are ignored. In their article 'Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism' Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney reveal how in Mexico, the word 'indio' (Indian) is used as a synonym of 'stupid' or 'ignorant' by the same people that proclaim to be proud of their pre-Columbian origins. They contend: '[...] indigenous peoples have been furnished with an equally mythologized but decidedly inferior social identity that divides them conceptually from other social groups along ethnic lines but also justifies their repression and exploitation.'³⁴ The situation of the ethnic group Mixtecs reflects that the glamorising of indigenous ways of life does not necessarily entail a discussion of the socio-economical conditions that maintain this group as oppressed.

Despite all the internal dissensions, essentialist representations of indigenous culture and the tendency to disregard the diversity of the movement's followers, the Chicano movement managed to bring awareness about their marginal situation. However, the nationalist program ignored internal gender, racial and class differences among the group that it intended to consolidate. In the name of unity and *Chicanismo*, important ideological dissensions were ignored and generalizations with regards to the Chicanos/as' origins were made. But it is precisely because of these vast generalizations and ambiguities that political symbols such as Aztlán still possess strong nationalist connotations among the present-day Chicano/a community. Also, it has to be noted that the discrepancies and historical imprecisions belonging to the indigenist narrative are mainly pointed out in an academic environment. Since the nationalist reasoning was partly built on mythical and fictional grounds, much of its ideology faded. Chicano/a nationalists who promoted the concept of a Chicano/a identity rooted in a pre-Columbian past ignored that identity - to cite Stuart Hall - is a

³⁴ Carole Nagengast and Michael Hearney, 'Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism' in *Latin American Research Review*, 25.2 (1990), 61-91 (p. 62).

'[...] production', which is never complete, always on process [...],³⁵ rather than authenticated by the resurgence of an indigenous lineage. The ambiguities surrounding the movement's ideology and goals have also been blamed for the waning of these political ideals. Mario Barrera gives his opinion on the reasons behind the end of the movement:

Although this period saw the publication of various "plans" and other political statements, a great deal of ambiguity remained. The exact ways in which the [communitarian and egalitarian] goals were to be combined and implemented were never spelled out, so that it was difficult to translate the goals into a concrete course of action. [...]
The vagueness of the ideology also made it difficult for activists to recognize the potential contradictions in what they were trying to accomplish, [...]. (p. 44)

Another reason that has been pointed out for the weakening of the movement with the passing of time has been its distancing from its working-class roots into a more middle-class oriented ideology. Cherrie Moraga explains that as '[...] the Movement grew older and more established, it became neutralized by middle-aged and middle-class concerns, as well as by a growing conservative trend in government.'³⁶ In an interview with Bruce-Novoa, José Montoya puts it more bluntly: '[...] some of our ex-Brown Berets, revolutionary-spouting Buddhas are now attorneys with HEW [...].'³⁷ These ideological inconsistencies were to be especially revealed in the literary production that arose from this crucial period.

The movement and literature

The Chicano/a literary wave that appeared in the 1960s as a result of the social and cultural empowerment promoted by the movement is sometimes known as the 'Chicano Renaissance'.³⁸ According to Federico D. Ortega Y Gasca, '[...] the Chicano Renaissance of the 1960s produced a literary manifesto whereby Chicano/a writers declared and avowed their sovereignty in pursuit of truths promoting the

³⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity and Difference*, ed by Kathryn Woodward (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 51-59 (p. 51).

³⁶ Cherrie Moraga, *The Last Generation* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), p. 57.

³⁷ Bruce-Novoa, 'Interview with Jose Montoya', in *Chicano Authors*, pp. 115-136, (p. 128).

³⁸ Francisco Lomeli states that this period was also named 'FloreCIMIENTO' (Blossoming). See 'Contemporary Chicano Literature', p. 90.

Chicano movement, praising *la raza*, and identifying cultural and linguistic oppression [...].³⁹ As we have seen earlier on with the epic poem *I am Joaquín*, the literature of the movement years did not only reflect the political aspirations of the time but also attempted to stress and boost a strong sense of ethnic identity through the exaltation of Mexican history. Another representative of this type of committed writing is Alurista (Alberto Urista), who attempts to continue the task of placing the Chicano within a rich cultural framework. His books of poetry, such as *Floriscanto en Aztlán* (1971) and *Nationchild Plumaraja* (1972) reveal his admiration for Nahuatl philosophy as well as recollect cultural figures to give rise to a source of Chicano pride. His politically conscious poetry not only invokes landmark symbols such as Aztlán but also experiments by intertwining Spanish and English. An extract from his poem 'When you have the Earth in Mouthful' illustrates the style and ideology behind his work:

Con mi gente no se juega. a mis
niños no le quita nadie los frijoles.
Se acabo la espera mr. jones,
"señor" jones (perdone usted "patron").
i don't care if you call yourself my uncle
and remind me that you ain't my
dad. my dad? mi padre era
zapata, juarez y madero mis
hermanos corky el león, chavez
el palomo, y los berets they are my
brothers. mis carnales son chicanos.
mis carnales son humanos mr. jones.
and the relativity of your coin
makes you meaningless.⁴⁰

Reflecting a denunciatory line of thought, Alurista's style nevertheless risks falling into grandiloquence and expresses a masculinist standpoint as seen in this poem.⁴¹ The figures that appear in the poem, be they historical or political in nature,

³⁹ Federico D. Ortega y Gasca, 'Chicano Literature: From 1942 to the Present', *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide*, ed. by Julio A. Martínez and Francisco A. Lomeli (Westport: Greenwood, 1985), pp. 137-148, (p. 137).

⁴⁰ Alurista, 'When you have the earth on mouthful', in *Nationchild Plumaraja* (San Diego: Toltecas en Aztlán Publications, 1972)

⁴¹ A similar point is made by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in 'Alurista's Poetics: The Oral, the Bilingual, the Pre-Columbian', in *Modern Chicano Writers*, ed. by Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, (Prentice Hall, Spectrum Book, 1979), pp.117-32.

are all male. Another exponent of the intrinsic ties between politics and literature is Luis Valdez, founder of the theatre group El Teatro Campesino [Farmer's Theatre] in 1965. Although he originally worked with César Chávez's farmworkers union, they separated due to ideological differences. The group was composed and directed by farmworkers, and dealt with pertinent issues, such as strikes. In 1967, El Teatro Campesino began to incorporate other aspects relevant to the working-class Chicano/a experience such as education, and labour exploitation. Through a series of short sketches called *actos*, El Teatro Campesino, staged plays such as *No saco nada de la escuela* (I don't get anything out of school). El Teatro Campesino became an important instrument for consciousness-raising as well as '[...] vehicle for action [...] mixing politics with punning satire, real life experiences with archetypes, humor with tragedy, and a sense of the epic with individuation.'⁴² Like much of the cultural production arising from this politically charged period, Valdez's work is nowadays heavily criticised for its nationalistic ideology and clichéd images of women.⁴³ One of these critical voices is Juan Bruce-Novoa who explains that this theatre '[...] satirizes the enemy or Chicano vices, with a simplistic Manichean vision only justifiable if one considers the drastic situation which produced the genre.'⁴⁴ Valdez's theatre also intended to stage the beliefs of an indigenist thinking through the representation of myths, which, led, according to Charles Yves Grangjeat, to a '[...] leathargic theater of symbols [...]'. (p. 24) The extent to which the movement's political ideology and Valdez's cultural production were related is expressed by Carlos Muñoz: 'Many of the ideas behind the conceptualisation of the Chicano identity and the development of the Chicano Generation of the late 1960s emanated

⁴² Lomell, 'Contemporary Chicano Literature, 1959-1990', p. 91.

⁴³ For a more detailed examination of El Teatro Campesino, see Carlota Cárdenas de Dwyer's 'The Development of Chicano Drama and Luis Valdez's Actos', pp. 160-75 and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano 'From *acto* to *mito*: A Critical Appraisal of the Teatro Campesino', pp. 176-85, in *Modern Chicano Writers*, ed. by Bruce-Novoa.

⁴⁴ Bruce-Novoa, 'Introduction' in *Chicano Authors*, p. 20. For a criticism of Luis Valdez and his work see Charles Yves Grangjeat's 'Nationalism, History and Myth: The Masks of Aztlán'.

from the ideas of Luis Valdez and the cultural work of his Teatro Campesino.' (p. 53)

As previously mentioned, in some instances the resurgence of the indigenist culture and philosophy only consisted of a narrow overview of the past which led to misconceptions and romanticizing of unmerited aspects of native societies.⁴⁵ Although Valdez's project may be seen as his particular expression of Chicano/a cultural nationalism, Yolanda Julia Broyles exposes certain aspects of this theatre that were not voiced at the time. In her 1993 article 'Women in El Teatro Campesino': Apoco Estaba Molacha la Virgen de Guadalupe?' Broyles attempts to challenge the idea of El Teatro Campesino as praiseworthy by disclosing the opinion of women who worked with Valdez. Broyles remarks that the female roles of El Teatro '[...] throughout the years [...] have remained fairly constant' and expands:

Women are first of all defined in a familial category: mother, grandmother, sister, or wife/girlfriend. All women are also divided into one of two sexual categories: whores or virgins. [...] Women's roles do not enjoy the dramatic space necessary for the unfolding of a character. Never is the world seen through the eyes of women, the other half of humanity.⁴⁶

An actress of Teatro Campesino also criticizes Valdez's for his choice of actors. The actress Socorro Valdez told Broyles that the reason she was once given for not obtaining the role of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a play was that she had too many teeth and that the Virgin had none. Broyles believes the real explanation behind such ludicrous excuse was that Socorro Valdez '[...] did not meet the standards of beauty that had been set for la Virgen Morena: Socorro had strong indígena features and dark brown skin.' (p. 178) Broyles is certain that this reason

⁴⁵ Even though this thesis criticizes an essentialist approach towards notions such as identity or ethnicity, I am nevertheless aware that a certain degree of essentialism is used when discussing these ideas. This is the argument of Diana Fuss who claims that, even though essentialism and constructionism are believed to be opposite theories, 'the bar between [them] is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be.' (p. xii) Even though constructionism 'insists that essence is itself a historical construction' (p. 2), she argues that categories such as 'man' and 'woman' remain constant. Thus, she states: '[...] social constructionists do not definitely escape the pull of essentialism, [...] indeed essentialism subtends the very idea of constructionism.' (p. 5) In *Essentially Speaking. Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990)

⁴⁶ Yolanda Julia Broyles, 'Women in El Teatro Campesino: Apoco Estaba Molacha la Virgen de Guadalupe?', in *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race and Gender*, pp 162-187 (p. 164).

also explains to a degree how other female members represented roles which involved masking their appearances.⁴⁷ Cases like these make one wonder whether the presence of the indigenist theme in the cultural production of the time was a mere requirement for the work to be seen as supporting the Chicano nationalist cause. But the issue of ethnic authenticity was to haunt Luis Valdez later on in his work. In her article 'Authentically Mexican? *Mi Querido Tom Mix* and *Cronos* Reframe Critical Questions', Ann Marie Stock narrates how Luis Valdez was accused of 'selling out' when he selected an Italian-American rather than a Latina actress for the role of Frida Kahlo in a film. According to Stock, he answered back by posing the question: "Who is to say what determines the Latino identity if we start counting drops of blood?"⁴⁸ a recriminating argument that could well have been articulated by the dark-skinned actresses of El Teatro Campesino. This is just one example of the extent to which the issue of ethnic authenticity is rooted in Chicano/a cultural production.

Broyles's work exemplifies the role of a feminist approach in the destabilization of the movement and its cultural production as an admirable human rights project. The date in which Broyles's article is published, 1993, is also emblematic as many critical re-evaluations of the movement are revealed many years after this crucial period. It seems that the passing of time has allowed writers and critics to look back and critically examine the ideological flaws of this literary production.

⁴⁷ See also Rosa Linda Fregoso's 'Zoot Suit. The 'Return' to the Beginning' for a discussion of Luis Valdez's film *Zoot Suit*, in *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. by John King, Ana M. López, Manuel Alvarado (London: British Film Institute, 1993), pp. 269-78. Fregoso argues that the representation of Chicano cultural identity is established in masculinist terms. For instance, the figure of the Pachuco, argues Fregoso, rather than embodying Chicano/a subjectivity, symbolizes 'the myth' of Chicano manliness.' (p. 271)

⁴⁸ Ann Marie Stock, 'Authentically Mexican? *Mi Querido Tom Mix* and *Cronos* Reframe Critical Questions', in *Mexico's Cinema. A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, ed. by Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel (Delaware, Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), pp. 267-86 (p. 268).

The creation of a Chicano/a canon

I would like to draw attention to the critical voices of Juan Bruce-Novoa and the writers he interviewed for his book *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* (1986). These writers were already making comments similar to those latter reiterated by the revisionist critics. Juan Bruce-Novoa in an article entitled 'Canonical and Non-Canonical Texts' warns of the existence of a Chicano/a literary canon that is based in exclusively nationalist terms. He argues that, as a result of the political agenda of the movement, literature written by Chicanos/as was expected to deal exclusively with the political ideology expressed during the movement. He states:

Identity was seen as a process of historical review carried out through an ideology of nation building which stressed several keypoints: retrieval of family and ethnic tradition, identification with the working-class, struggle against assimilation-, and the dire results if these efforts were not continued. Identity was not simply to be found, but to be forged, with careful attention to history and ideology.⁴⁹

Bruce-Novoa explains that the 1970s Chicano/a literature syllabi included works such as Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers* (1969) and José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959)⁵⁰ but excluded the books of writers such as John Rechy whose subject matter did not stress a Chicano/a ethnic subjectivity or the ideas born out of the movement. Literature had to continue the political path delineated by the movement's ideology, risking producing works of poor quality, as Ricardo Sánchez notes in his interview with Bruce-Novoa: 'Much of what passes for Chicano literature is dead imagery and boring symbols and rhetoric.' (p. 231) By examining the works of Alurista, Gonzáles or Valdez, one could conclude that the introduction of indigenist motifs was almost mandatory, an unwritten requisite in order to be considered a writer committed to the Chicano cause. Ricardo Sánchez makes, quite

⁴⁹ Juan Bruce-Novoa, 'Canonical and Non-Canonical Texts', in *Retrospace*, pp. 132-45 (p. 134).

⁵⁰ *Pocho* deals with the identity issues faced by the protagonist Richard Rubio, who lives between the Mexican and Anglo-American cultures. José Antonio Villarreal, *Pocho* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970). *The Plum Plum Pickers* narrates the harsh life of a Mexican family who work in the fields and are exploited by their Anglo-American bosses. (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1971)

bluntly, a similar point in his interview with Bruce-Novoa. With respects to Chicano/a literature he says:

Yet, we find ourselves inundated by prissy types with pseudo and facile crap, such as the pyramid builders and their so-called jive of actionless indígenas [native Indians], roseated indios, and their perpetuation of quasimystical idiocies adumbrates our youth even more. (p. 232)

Even though the indigenist theme was not given the same attention as Alurista, Gonzáles or Valdez did, the ideas stressed during the movement were certainly emphasized in the literary production of the 1970s. Works published during the 1970s such as Vásquez's *Chicano* (1970) and Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* (1972) represent the experiences of migrant workers and stress family values and a strong sense of ethnic identity. In a 1982 article entitled 'The Evolution of Chicano Literature' Raymund A. Paredes describes Chicano literature as '[...] that body of work produced by United States citizens and residents of Mexican descent for whom a sense of ethnicity is a critical part of their literary sensibilities and for whom the portrayal of their ethnic experience is a major concern.'⁵¹ Are texts that do not set ethnicity at the core of the work thus not authentically Chicano/a? What happens to works such as Acosta's *Autobiography of A Brown Buffalo* (1972) or Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) where the ethnic identity of the protagonist is not the main focus of the text? According to Bruce-Novoa, they encounter problems entering the canon or they simply do not enter it. Martínez and Lomeli also deal with the problem arising from the concept of a Chicano/a canon, especially with respect to the novel. They examine the list of Chicano/a novels conceived by two literary critics. Discussing the list devised by Carlota Cárdenas de Dwyer, they state that novels like *Pocho* and *The Plum Plum Pickers* are rejected by the critic because '[...] the novelists have been

⁵¹ Raymund A. Paredes, 'The Evolution of Chicano Literature', in *Three American Literatures. Essays in Chicano, Native-American, and Asian-American Literature for Teachers of American Literature*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982), pp. 32-79 (p. 74).

unwilling to write for barrio audiences or "to promote a specific social or political issue." (p. 184) They conclude

[...] the problem of definition and canon is real. Critics may exclude a novel on numerous and often conflicting grounds: date of publication, cultural content, social or political themes, the author's racist attitudes, failure to write to a particular audience, failure to identify properly with the community, and use of stereotyped characters. [...]

Quite clearly, to define the Chicano novel one needs to avoid demanding particular social, political, or racial themes.⁵²

John Rechy is a writer that has encountered considerable problems with respect to the Chicano/a canon. His novel *City of Night* narrates the experiences of a Chicano male prostitute as he travels through different cities of the United States. Despite being an international bestseller, *City of Night* is rarely discussed in Chicano/a literary circles. This is due to the fact that the protagonist's Chicano/a identity is not positioned as a central theme in the text. Another reason that has led to this novel's marginalisation is the overt treatment of homosexuality, a thorny subject if we consider the emphasis placed on family values and community as a result of the movement's agenda.⁵³ Raymund A. Paredes believes that this novel 'virtually devoid of ethnic content, probably should not [...] (p. 74) be considered part of Chicano literature.⁵⁴ Aware of the limitations of labels and of the critics' reticence to name him a 'Chicano writer', John Rechy protests:

Labeled by sexual persuasion, ethnicity, or the gender of a writer, such a literature is guaranteed a restricted audience of like identification. Very few [...] - the least threatening - may find their way into English Departments that too often disdain minority voices. A few more may find a place in prestigious Chicano Studies courses. There, however, heavy emphasis is sometimes placed on political requirements over literary quality; a further separation occurs, a ghetto within a ghetto, where arguments might occur about who is or is not a "real Chicano writer".⁵⁵

⁵² Julio A. Martínez and Francisco A. Lomeli, 'Contemporary Chicano Novel, 1959-1979', pp. 184-97 (pp. 184-85).

⁵³ Juan Bruce-Novoa examines the treatment of homosexuality in five Chicano novels produced from 1959 to 1970. Although he argues that in some of them homosexuality is depicted as a degrading sexuality, he ends by claiming these novels portray a Chicano community 'less sexually repressive than we might expect.' (p. 105) In 'Homosexuality and the Chicano Novel', in *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature of the United States*, ed. by Genieve Fabre (Texas: Arte Publico Press, 1988), pp. 98-106.

⁵⁴ See Karen Christian's chapter 'Invisible Chicanos. Gay and Lesbian Identities in the Fiction of Sheila Ortiz Taylor and John Rechy' in her book *Show and Tell* for a discussion of the performative nature of ethnicity and drag in the work of John Rechy. *Show and Tell. Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1997)

⁵⁵ Debra Castillo, 'Interview with John Rechy', *Diacritics*, 25 (1995), 113-25.

Another Chicano writer who shook the foundations of the Chicano/a canon in 1982 is Richard Rodríguez with the publication of his controversial autobiographical novel *Hunger for Memory. The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. His criticism of government programmes on affirmative action and bilingual education has unsurprisingly attracted much defamation and consequently much publicity.⁵⁶ Despite these controversial statements, his book successfully manages to transmit the identity problems suffered by a second generation Mexican immigrant. Having had an extensive education, the narrator feels there is a lack of communication between his Mexican parents and himself. Rodríguez summarizes the content of his autobiography as: '[...] the story of the scholarship boy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents.'⁵⁷ The favouring of the English language over his parents' language and the criticism articulated by members of the Chicano/a community have led the critic Randy A. Rodríguez to argue that Rodríguez embodies the contemporary Chicano counterpart of La Malinche.⁵⁸ I would like to shed light on some reasons that I believe may have annoyed certain Chicano/a readers and critics. Right at the start of his narration, we read: 'Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnameable ancestors', (p. 124) a statement that ridicules and annuls the validity of the movement's return to origins as a source of Mexican pride. Rodríguez also reveals how his own family's feeling of shame towards his dark skin had instilled in him an inferiority complex. He *dares* to tell the reader the fear felt by his female family members - and by implication by many Chicanos/as - of giving birth to dark skinned children and divulges the remedies that these women applied to

⁵⁶ The Special issue on Richard Rodríguez by *The Texas Studies in Literature and Language* journal is an indication of the renown of this writer, especially considering that at the time, he had only published two books. Ed. José Limón, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 40:4 (1998)

⁵⁷ Richard Rodríguez, *Hunger for Memory. The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 5.

⁵⁸ See Randy A. Rodríguez, 'Richard Rodriguez Reconsidered: Queering the Sissy (Ethnic) Subject', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 40:4 (1998), 396-423.

their children so that they would be 'lighter' (such as applying a mixture of egg white and lemon juice concentrate on the face). He explains how events, such as when his mother required him to cover his body in public, led him to grow up feeling unattractive. Rodríguez challenges the movement's idea of the Chicano/a community at odds with United States racist beliefs. He suggests that Chicanos/as are proud of their indigenous ancestors, but they don't want indigenous looking children like Rodríguez himself. Passages such as these help one understand Rodríguez's distancing and critical attitude towards his culture. In 1992, Rodríguez published *Days of Obligation. An Argument with My Mexican Father*. This text can be interpreted as a revision of *Hunger for Memory* as it adopts a more inclusive attitude towards Mexican culture.

The reticence in accepting the work of writers such as Richard Rodríguez indicates the existence of a Chicano/a canon prescribing the content of the works that enter it. Although Chicano/a literature gives a voice to a minority that had been subdued and stereotyped by the mainstream, the canon silences dissenting views that do not fit a predetermined idea of a Chicano/a subject. It is worth quoting Henry Giroux on this point as he explains the paradoxical consequences of the rise of a minority group:

Identity politics enabled many formerly silenced and displaced groups to emerge from the margins of power and dominant culture to reassert and reclaim suppressed identities and experiences, but in doing so, they often substituted one master narrative for another, invoked a politics of separatism, and suppressed differences within their own 'liberatory' narratives.⁵⁹

Chicano/a writers such as John Rechy and Richard Rodríguez have not only pushed the boundaries of a Chicano/a literary canon but also allowed comprehension about the diversity of political orientations within the Chicano/a community. By denying these works the entry into the 'Chicano/a canon', critics are turning a blind eye to the experiences and subjectivities of a segment of the Chicano/a community

⁵⁹ Henry Giroux, 'Living Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Representation', *Cultural Studies*, 7:1, (1993), 1-27 (p. 3).

which, for some reason or another, do not possess a sense of Chicano/a identity based on nationalist or ethnic oriented terms. I will return to the problems of a Chicano/a canon later on in the chapter since I believe it is a subject that deserves more detailed attention.

The first section of this chapter has discussed the socio-political ideology of the Chicano movement and the literature produced at the time. It has also exposed the foundational ideas behind this movement and its weaknesses. The second section will now aim to analyse how these key themes and symbols are questioned and revised within the literature of the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, the revisionist direction of Chicano/a writing will begin to be explored.

Chicana cultural revisions

The Chicano/a identity endorsed by the movement's cultural nationalist ideology was imagined in a masculinist and nationalist language. Indigenism and the resurgence of emblematic Mexican icons allowed Chicanos/as to recover a history of survival that would give them an empowering sense of identity. Even though the ideology of indigenism faded with the passing of time, it re-emerged in the cultural production of Chicanas during the 1980s. Arthur Ramirez notes that in the mid-80s, '[...] Chicanas were taking up the Indigenist theme as their own and in an entirely new way.'⁶⁰ But this woman-centred indigenism distinguishes itself from the one sustained by the movement: it draws attention to female icons as well as to the interrelation of race, class and sexuality in the oppression of Chicanas.

Chicana indigenism embodies on the one hand a response to the male oriented perspective on Mexican history and role models and on the other an alternative thinking to the white feminist movement. Compared to the movement's indigenism,

⁶⁰ Ramirez, p. 73.

Chicana indigenism is articulated as a more multifaceted philosophy, attempting to counteract numerous oppressive ideologies, not just U.S. racism.

This innovative approach is best exemplified in the reconfigurations that the nationalist symbol of Aztlán undergoes in the cultural articulations of some Chicanas. According to Alicia Arrizón, 'Since the 1970s, the anti-hegemonic discourse of feminism has played a crucial role in reshaping the idea of Aztlán [...]'.⁶¹ This thinking is mirrored in Ester Hernández's etching *Libertad* (1976) where a woman is seen carving a pre-Columbian goddess out of the Statue of Liberty. At the base of the sculpture, 'Aztlán' is inscribed. This image allows many readings: not only is the mainstream U.S. symbol of hope and equality represented as invalid and deceitful, but it is also rewritten allowing an ethnic and woman-centred signification.



⁶¹ Alicia Arrizón, 'Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions', *Theatre Journal*, 52:1 (2000), 23-49 (p. 45).

Celeste Olalquiaga argues that the contemporary re-articulation of First World icons is an expression of postcolonial societies. This 'cultural transvestism' as she terms it, does not eliminate the original signification but allows the superimposition of other signifiers: 'The imposition of added layers of meaning [...] transforms the icon into a baroque object whose weight distorts the effectivity of any one signification.'⁶² This revamped Aztlán, with its feminist and ethnic inscription, is posited as the new symbol of hope for new migrating groups. Also, Aztlán, usually envisioned along Aztec male gods and warriors, this time acknowledges women by presenting a pre-Columbian goddess. Laura Elisa Pérez goes as far as arguing that this etching 'is perhaps the first symbolic representation of Aztlán and the United States as spaces of potential female empowerment, and among the first to represent the hybrid ethnic origins and identity of the nation(s).'⁶³ In an interview, Esther Hernández explains why she believed the Statue of Liberty was a symbol in need of re-configuration: 'The Statue of Liberty was everything, the flag and Uncle Sam and all that. I did *Libertad* to show the indigenous roots of the Americas. Borders did not always exist, but migrations have always occurred.'⁶⁴ The substitution of the Statue of Liberty with the concept of Aztlán also evokes the history of migration undergone by the Mexican population, especially after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo where more than half of Mexico's national territory was ceded to the United States. The inhabitants of this territory, new migrants, were not welcomed by the Statue of Liberty as the European migrants were.

Another feminist re-articulation of the nationalist symbol Aztlán is undertaken by lesbian writer Cherrie Moraga in her book *The Last Generation*. After

⁶² Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis. Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 86.

⁶³ Laura Elisa Pérez, 'El desorden, Nationalism, and Chicana/o Aesthetics', in *Between Woman and Nation. Nationalism, Transnational Feminism, and the State*, ed. by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallén (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 19-48 (p. 29).

⁶⁴ quoted in Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art. Inside Outside the Master's House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 141-42.

criticising the homophobia existing in United States society and Chicano/a community, Moraga calls for the creation of a nation that would allow sexual, gender and racial difference:

As we are forced to struggle for our right to love free of disease and discrimination, "Aztlán" as our imagined homeland begins to take on renewed importance. [...] Chicana lesbians and gay men do not merely seek inclusion in the Chicano nation; we seek a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender. We seek a culture that can allow for the natural expression of our femaleness and maleness and our love without prejudice or punishment. In a "queer" Aztlán, there would be no freaks, no "others" to point one's finger at.⁶⁵

Her all-embracing concept of Aztlán differs considerably from the one imagined by cultural nationalists. In Moraga's writing, Aztlán embraces the 'queers', the others that is, gays, women, as well as individuals from other races. Moraga's passage reflects the manner in which the utopian symbol of Aztlán has been stretched beyond its nationalistic significance to attract a more (sexually, gendered, racial) diverse community. Moraga suggests that if the symbol of Aztlán is to survive, it must acknowledge other subject positions that differ from the heterosexual nationalist male Chicano.

Chicanas also recuperate and re-vision pre-Colombian goddesses in order to create strong and captivating female figures. A humorous reconstruction of the indigenous deity Coatlicue is presented by Pat Mora in the piece 'Coatlicue's Rules: Advice from Aztec Goddess'.⁶⁶ Imitating the agony-aunt style, the goddess Coatlicue gives advice to a female audience on issues such as housework or child bearing. Intertwining passages from her own life - the mythical stories surrounding this deity - , Coatlicue recommends to 'Avoid housework': 'I was sweeping slivers. Gold and jade, picking up/ after four hundred sons who think they're gods, / and their spoiled sister' (p. 61) and to 'Insist on personal interviews':

Past is present, remember. Men carved me,
wrote my story, and Eve's, Malinche's, Guadalupe's,

⁶⁵ *The Last Generation*, p. 164.

⁶⁶ Pat Mora, 'Coatlicue's Rules: Advice from an Aztec Goddess', in *Agua Santa, Holy Water* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), pp. 60-63.

Llorona's, snakes everywhere, even in our mouths. (p. 63)

The feminist message at the core of this Chicana indigenous agenda is given a new twist by providing a satirical approach on the commonalities between a pre-Columbian goddess and an ordinary Chicana.

Another representative of Chicana indigenism is Gloria Anzaldúa with her renowned book *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. Written in a poetic voice, her book consists of an amalgam of poetry and prose, where the author intermingles history with autobiography. The text expresses the multiplicity of subjectivities that a Chicana like Anzaldúa - lesbian, of Mexican origin, bilingual - must embrace in the United States:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanic and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, [...].⁶⁷

The Chicana living in the borderlands must adopt what she calls a 'mestiza consciousness', a way of thinking that will enable her to undermine binaries such as woman/man or Mexican/Anglo. In this way, the mestiza acquires a capacity to tolerate contradictions and ambiguities. Her indigenist approach manifests itself in her handling of pre-Columbian history and goddesses, especially the Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue. Anzaldúa re-appropriates the goddess Coatlicue to express a state of contradiction and the mestiza's subjectivity. The 'Coatlicue state' represents a chaotic state previous to the awareness that binary oppositions can be destroyed. Once this stage has passed, 'a new life begins' (p. 49) and 'everything rush[es] to a center, a nucleus' (p. 51).

Anzaldúa's feminist approach allows her to enter into a discussion on the different directions undertaken by oppression. She discusses how sexism intermingles with other levels of oppression such as those practiced by the Catholic

⁶⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pp. 80-81.

Church or by a racist society to marginalize Chicanas. Anzaldúa's feminist articulation is representative of what Chela Sandoval has named 'oppositional consciousness', a type of thinking practiced by U.S. Third World feminists that 'have long understood that one's race, culture, or class often denies comfortable or easy access to either category, that the interactions between social categories produce other genders within the social hierarchy.'⁶⁸

Even though Anzaldúa's handling of indigenous deities and Mexican history can seem sentimental and over-generalizing, we must keep in mind that her work is not only deeply personal but also written from a poetic perspective. Despite being one of the best-known Chicano/a books, this text has provoked much criticism from Chicano/a critics themselves. I believe much disapproval arises from her personal interpretations of particular historical and mythical figures. Much criticism is provoked by her recovery of pre-Columbian deities and historical figures, which resembles the movement's cultural ideology in far too many ways to dismiss. This is precisely the argument taken up by Alvina E. Quintana as she criticizes Anzaldúa's 'self-fashioning quest':

Anzaldúa's project resembles that of Alurista, Chicano poet laureate of the 1960s, whom many critics have credited with generating the cultural nationalist call for a return to the indigenous homeland. Anzaldúa's opening chapter, "The Homeland, Aztlán/*El Otro Mexico*," rearticulates Alurista's call in the rhetoric of the 1980s; because of its focus on women, her alternative rendition of history and myth creatively shifts the reader's attention from the masculinist representations that generally dominate nationalism.⁶⁹

Quintana correctly points out that a feminist orientated indigenism does not necessarily mean that the writer is not supporting a nationalist ideology. Although Anzaldúa is intending to distance herself from the writers of the movement's thinking, Quintana is keen to notice that they may share political convictions. A

⁶⁸ Chela Sandoval, 'U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World', *Genders*, 10 (1991), 1-24 (p. 4).

⁶⁹ Alvina E. Quintana, *Home Girls. Chicana Literary Voices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 128. See also Alesia García's PhD thesis where she offers a critical discussion of Chicanas' indigenist discourse. Alesia García, 'Aztec Nation: History, Inscription, and Indigenista Feminism in Chicana Literature and Political Discourse' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Arizona, 1998)

similar point is made by Norma Alarcón when she argues that 'Although [Anzaldúa] rejects a masculinist ethnonationalism that would exclude the Queer, she does not totally discard a "neonationalism" [...] for the reappropriated borderlands, Aztlán.'⁷⁰ On the other hand, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano defends Anzaldúa's manipulation of indigenous history by arguing that whilst Chicano movement artists 'invoked indigenismo in the construction of an exclusionary, singular Chicano identity, [Anzaldúa] invokes it in the construction of an inclusive, multiple one.'⁷¹

Benjamin Alire Sáenz is another critic who disagrees with Anzaldúa's ideas. He believes the resurgence of a history as distant as the pre-Columbian one is itself a snobbish act due to the lack of connection between contemporary and indigenous societies. Sáenz argues that Anzaldúa's appropriation of indigenous cultures entails assuming an identity that does not really belong to her.

In foraging for a usable past, she fetishizes Aztec and Indian culture. Finding solutions (and identities) by appropriating indigenous mythologies is disturbing and very problematic - but even if this were not so, Anzaldúa's project offers very little to Chicanos and Chicanas who live in mostly urban settings. At the very least, her "solutions" are inappropriate for a late-twentieth-century audience. Added to that, appropriating Aztec and/or any Indian culture in order to create a new identity is not so different from Englishmen appropriating the "classical" culture of the ancient Greeks as their own.⁷²

Alire Sáenz also takes exception to the fact that Anzaldúa romanticizes the link between Chicanos/as and the peasantry. He finds ludicrous Anzaldúa's suggestion that working in the field guarantees a spiritual bond with Mother Earth, especially considering the history of abuse undergone by Mexican migrants in the fields. Sáenz's article offers one of the most critical and disapproving views written so far on Anzaldúa's work, an attitude reminiscent of the critical analysis produced on the movement's writers such as Alurista and Valdez by feminist academics. In fact, the arguments taken up by Sáenz in relation to the appropriation and romanticizing of

⁷⁰ Norma Alarcón, 'Anzaldúa's *Frontera*: Inscribing Gynetics', in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, ed. by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg. (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996), pp. 41-53 (p. 48).

⁷¹ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, 'Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La frontera*: Cultural Studies, "Difference," and the Non-Unitary Subject', *Cultural Critique*, 28 (1994), 5-28 (p. 12).

⁷² Alire Sáenz, p. 85.

native and rural cultures could also be directed towards the literary production of some movement writers. The similarities between Anzaldúa's and the movement's literature are too obvious to dismiss, an argument not considered by Sáenz.

Although Anzaldúa's indigenist approach can be regarded as essentialist, one must remember that one of the text's intentions is to re-write important female figures that have traditionally been articulated from a patriarchal perspective as well as branded as traitors or submissive. Even though Anzaldúa has been accused of supporting a nationalist ideology, she denies this in an interview maintained with Christine Weiland in 1983, four years prior to the publication of *Borderlands*:

[...] I don't believe in nationalism; I'm a citizen of the universe. I think it's good to claim your ethnic identity and your racial identity. But it's also the source of all the wars and all the violence, all these borders and walls people erect. I'm tired of borders and I'm tired of walls.⁷³

However, in an interview published in 2002, she argues that she 'ha[s] changed since *Borderlands*'⁷⁴ and objects to the fact that this book, written in the 1980s, is seen as the representative of her whole work. These words suggest that Anzaldúa does not identify anymore with the nationalist-oriented ideas articulated in this book.

Ana Castillo, an important Chicana writer whose work features in this thesis, also has a feminist indigenist agenda. Her book *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* resembles Anzaldúa's project of providing a woman centred account of Mexican history and culture. The title of her book refers to the dreamers that were ordered to die by Moctezuma since they had foretold the fall of the Aztec Empire. The title already predicts an indigenist discourse centred on feminist issues. She coins the term Xicanisma to refer to this strand of indigenism that voices Chicanas' concerns: 'It is our task as Xicanistas, to not only reclaim our indigenismo – but also

⁷³ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Within the Crossroads: Lesbian/Feminist/Spiritual Development. An Interview with Christine Weiland (1983)', in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, ed. by AnaLouise Keating (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 71-127 (p. 118).

⁷⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Interview with Karin Rosa Ika', in *Chicana Ways: Conversations with Ten Chicana Writers* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002), pp. 1-24 (p. 4).

to reinsert the forsaken feminine into our consciousness.⁷⁵ Similarly to Anzaldúa, Castillo calls the readers to see the traditional icon, the Virgin of Guadalupe, as a spiritual and empowering role model by disclosing the pre-Columbian deity, Tonantzin, from which she arises. Castillo calls upon the Chicana to create her own subjectivity and spirituality by intermingling indigenous practices with Catholicism: '[...] the Xicanista combines the traditional view of the Christian god with goddess worship to give her a source of inner strength.' (p. 10) Even though her feminist project is valuable, her rhetorical style and prose suggests that in order to be a real Chicana, one must follow the guidelines established by Castillo. Her text has also been condemned due to over generalizations regarding Mexican history and essentialist assertions. Rosaura Sánchez criticizes some of Castillo's 'questionable statements' such as the suggestion that 'Aztec history or collective memory is said to be imprinted genetically and accessible to modern-day "Xicanas"'.⁷⁶ Sánchez broadens her criticism of Castillo's text to include the indigenist oriented literary production of many Chicano/a writers.

This refashioned *indigenismo* in Anzaldúa, Castillo, and in other recent Chicano and Chicana publications becomes the shaping discourse that enables the writers to counter Western rationalism and, more specifically, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions, while at the same time positioning the writers as the bearers of ethnic authenticity. (p. 358)

Castillo also includes indigenous motifs in one of her novels, *Sapagonia*. (*An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter*). The protagonist, Máximo Madrigal, is so infatuated with artist Pastora Ake that he imagines her to be the goddess Coatlicue. Facile identifications between the female character and the native deity undermine her indigenist project. For instance,

She was not the enigmatic beauty of Di Vinci, but the harsh enigma of nature's ferocity over man, the thrashing of a tornado, the scorching lava of the erupting volcano, the hurricane that swept away entire villages into the sea. Awesome Coatlicue, whose severed head was replaced

⁷⁵ Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma* (New York: Plume, 1995), p. 12.

⁷⁶ Rosaura Sánchez, 'Reconstructing Chicana Gender Identity', *American Literary History*, 9:2. (1997), 350-63, (p. 360).

with two streams of blood that became serpents' heads; the same blood that gives life demands it through war, the eternal struggle of all civilizations.⁷⁷

That the protagonist would imagine for years that his lover is a personification of Coatlicue is not only inconceivable for an adult reader, but also ostentatious. Passages such as these make one wonder whether the inclusion of pre-Columbian references has more to do with the writer's intention to be accepted as indigenist or cultured, rather than with an examination into the characters' relationship.

Revising the figure of La Malinche

The re-visioning of the historical figure La Malinche represents this feminist indigenist discourse that attempts to re-write pre-Columbian history and mythology from a woman's perspective. La Malinche was the Aztec woman who acted as Cortés's lover and translator during the Conquest of Mexico. Despite the lack of details regarding this woman and on the social and historical circumstances that led her to be Cortés's lover and translator, she has been branded a traitor, and, held responsible for the conquest of the Americas. La Malinche is one of the three female Mexican role models that fall into the bad/good woman dichotomy. Disagreeing with the traditional representation of these three icons – also the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Llorona –, Chicana writers reconstruct them as empowering female figures. Chapter two and chapter three will address the similar ways in which the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Llorona are revamped and re-configured from a feminist perspective.

Many critics have examined La Malinche in an attempt to free her from the negative connotations that she embodies. One of these critics is Jean Franco who reveals that La Malinche was regarded as an icon, '[...] both by the indigenous people who ascribed extraordinary power to her and by the Spaniards for whom she

⁷⁷ Ana Castillo, *Supogonia (An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter)* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 1990), pp.311-12.

was the exemplary convert.'⁷⁸ She also remarks that it was not until Mexico became an independent nation and the problem of national identity emerged that '[...] Doña Marina, transformed into La Malinche, came to symbolize the humiliation – the rape – of the indigenous people and the act of treachery that would lead to their [Mexican people] oppression.'(p. 131) The search for a national identity required the creation of a scapegoat figure that would embody the humiliation represented by the Conquest. As Franco puts it, ' [...] women became the territory over which the quest for (male) national identity passed [...].'(p. 131) Octavio Paz goes as far as to assert that her treachery is responsible for the shame that founds Mexican male identity:

Y del mismo modo que el niño no perdona a su madre que lo abandona para ir en busca de su padre, el pueblo mexicano no perdona su traición a la Malinche. Ella incarna lo abierto, lo chingado, frente a nuestros indios, estoicos, impassibles y cerrados.⁷⁹

Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez observe that within a few years after the Conquest, La Malinche disappeared. It was only after three centuries that La Malinche was resurrected as the traitor of the Americas and made responsible for the inferiority complex of the Mexican population. Therefore, it is not surprising that La Malinche has been re-visioned by Mexican and Chicana writers and critics during the last two decades.⁸⁰ Academics such as Juana Amanda Alegria and Adelaida R. Del Castillo highlight La Malinche's position as a slave and

⁷⁸ Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 131.

⁷⁹ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997), p. 224.

'And in the same way that the child does not forgive the mother who leaves to search for his father, the Mexican people do not forgive La Malinche for her treachery. She incarnates what is open, fucked, in contrast with our stoic, impassive and closed Indians'.

⁸⁰ I do not intend to provide a full discussion of the Malinche figure since that would be a long task. There is an extensive bibliography on this subject. See Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature. From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); Norma Alarcón, 'Chicana's Feminist Literature: a Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object', in *This Bridge Called my Back*, pp. 182-90; Mary Louise Pratt, ' "Yo soy La Malinche" Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism', *Callaloo*, 16.4 (1993), 859-73; Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

victim. Del Castillo indicates that she was sold into slavery by her own mother, and therefore she is the one betrayed rather than the betrayer.⁸¹

Although Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos has already revised the figure of La Malinche in her writing, Chicana writers and critics engage in an extensive reconstruction of this Mexican and Chicano/a symbol of female treason.⁸² This is partly because the treacherous aspect that surrounds this personage is transferred to Chicanas who are accused of being Malinches when they marry an Anglo man, seek higher education, or disclose their sexuality. Cherríe Moraga evokes La Malinche when referring to defiant Chicanas:

The woman who defies her role as subservient to her husband, father, brother, or son by taking control of her own sexual destiny is purported to be a "traitor to her race" by contributing to the "genocide" of her people - whether or not she has children. [...] Like the Malinche of Mexican history, she is corrupted by foreign influences which threaten to destroy her people.⁸³

La Malinche is also re-articulated as the founder of mestizaje, as from her union with Cortés, a mixed-raced child was born who represented the hybridity of the Americas. Chicana writers also identify with this figure because they, like La Malinche, are capable of living in two cultures and two languages.⁸⁴ This duplicity, rather than being seen as treacherous, is regarded as valuable and empowering. This approach is reflected in Carmen Tafolla's poem 'La Malinche' (1978) which envisions this icon as the creator of a mestizo race, foretelling 'another world' where 'la raza' (Chicano/a people) would live.

Yo soy la Malinche.
My people called me Malintzin Tenepal
the Spaniards called me Doña Marina. [...]
Years later, you took away my child (my sweet
Mestizo new world child)

⁸¹ See Evangelina Enríquez and Alfredo Mirandé, *La Chicana, the Mexican-American Woman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

⁸² Refer to Sandra Messinger Cypess's work for a discussion of Castellanos' re-articulation of La Malinche.

⁸³ *Loving in the War Years*, p. 113.

⁸⁴ Tzvetan Todorov makes a similar point in his discussion of La Malinche: 'I myself see her [as] the symbol of the cross-breeding of cultures; she thereby heralds the modern state of Mexico and beyond that, the present state of us all, since we are not invariably bilingual, we are inevitably bi- or tri-cultural. La Malinche glorifies mixture to the detriment of purity - Aztec or Spanish - and the role of the intermediary.' (p. 101) In *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984)

to raise him in your world
 You *still* didn't see.
 You *still* didn't see.

And history would call me Chingada.

But Chingada I was not.
 Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor.
 For I was not traitor to myself –
 I saw a dream
 And I *reached* it.
 Another world

la raza.
 la raaaaa-zaaaaa.....⁸⁵

La Malinche is presented as the forebear of not only the Americas but also of the Chicano/a population, thus giving this figure a greater significance than the one ascribed to her by previous generations. Mary Louise Pratt points out that the opening line of this poem, 'Yo soy la Malinche', echoes the well-known epic poem *Yo soy Joaquín/ I am Joaquín* by Rodolfo Corky Gonzáles. (p. 868) In this way, Tafolla's poem also acts as a counter-narrative to the masculinist account of Mexican history provided by Chicano/a nationalists. In 'La Malinche a Cortez y Vice Versa', Angela de Hoyos presents an interesting insight into the slave position of La Malinche by indicating that the submissive attitude that she adopted may have been a survival technique, a camouflage in order to save her life. Angela de Hoyos presents a fictional conversation between La Malinche and Cortés, suggesting that La Malinche may not have been the submissive woman previously portrayed:

ELLA: Sí, amo y señor, tienes razón.
 Ya sé que me quieres
 y perdona mi necedad. Es que nosotras
 las mujeres siempre soñamos con imposibles.

Y entre paréntesis ELLA se dijo:
 Huh! Y para eso te di
 mi sangre y mi pueblo!
 Sí, ya lo veo, gringo desabrido,
 tanto así me quieres
 que me casarás
 con tu subordinado Don Juan, [...].⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Carmen Tafolla, 'La Malinche', in *Infinite Divisions. An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, ed. by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), pp. 198-99.

⁸⁶ Angela de Hoyos, 'La Malinche a Cortez y Vice Versa/ La Malinche to Cortez and Vice Versa', in *Infinite Divisions*, pp. 200-02. 'Yes, my lord and master, you are right/ I know that you love me/ and forgive my stupidity It's that/ we women always dream of the impossible./ And between parenthesis SHE said to herself: Huh! And for this I gave you/ my blood and my people!/ Yes, I see it now,

The reconstruction of La Malinche as a positive role model is part of the feminist revision of Mexican indigenous history. Instead of rejecting this female symbol like previous generations, Chicanas embrace this icon as a representative of their subjectivity.⁸⁷ Thus, Chicanas accomplish two tasks: they obtain an empowering female role model and they free La Malinche from the negative signification she has traditionally represented.

Although this feminist revision brought to light empowering female role models and intended to distance itself from the male oriented narrations of the Chicanos' past, it also triggered strong critical recriminations. Arthur Ramírez summarizes the feminist indigenist discourse in these words:

Idealization was everywhere present, advocacy scholarship prevailed, and points were scored in favor of an Indigenist-based origin to feminism; i.e., an original matriarchal system; the importance of fertility goddesses; a male and female dualistic principle as central to Aztec thought, unrealistic, overstated interpretations of female equality in the structure of the family, or in the Aztec social order. Research was clearly exploited to support ideology, to score 2points [sic] as part of advocacy scholarship.⁸⁸

Ramírez suggests that despite intending to counteract the male-oriented indigenism and to incorporate Chicanas *her/story* into Chicano *history*, some Chicana writers made similar mistakes by over-generalizing and romanticizing the female indigenous goddesses' mythology.

Re-writing Chicano/a history

Another aspect of this revisionist project involves the reconstruction of Mexican male icons that were idolized during the movement. Apart from providing alternative female role models to the male figures idolized during the movement, Chicana writers such as Sandra Cisneros also question and destabilize certain Mexican and

insipid gringo/ you like me so much/ that you want to marry me/ to your subordinate Don Juan [...].'
(text's translation)

⁸⁷ Other Chicana writers that incorporate the Malinche figure in their writings are Lucha Corpi, Sandra Cisneros and Lorna Dee Cervantes.

⁸⁸ Arthur Ramírez, 'Feminist Neo-Indigenism in Chicana Aztlan', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 7:4 (1995), 71-78 (pp. 74-75).

Chicano male icons' status. In her short story 'Eyes of Zapata', Cisneros revises one of the Mexican male archetypes that the Chicano movement members referred to as a source of pride. Following the feminist strand of these writers, the story gives a voice to Zapata's partner, Inés, who has to endure his womanising ways. The revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, far from being a strong role model, is described as a famous man who takes advantage of his status to attract women. Inés is aware of the existence of Zapata's mistresses and children around the country but tolerates the situation:

You have your *pastimes*. That's how it's said, no? Your many *pastimes*. I know you take to your bed women half my age. [...] They say you have three women in Jojutla, all under one roof. And that your women treat each other with a most extraordinary harmony, sisters in a cause who believe in the greater good of the revolution. [...] These stupid country girls, how can they resist you? The magnificent Zapata in his elegant *charro* costume, riding a splendid horse.⁸⁹

This passage suggests that the role of the *soldaderas* – the women that accompanied the troops during the revolution⁹⁰ – was undermined and reduced to sexual companions during the revolution by men like Zapata. Cisneros also implies that the Mexican Revolution, despite its insurgent nature, was not concerned in improving women's situation: 'If I complain about these woman concerns of mine, I know you'll tell me – Inés, these aren't times for that – wait until later. But, Miliano, I'm tired of being told to wait.' (p. 94) Zapata's sexist attitude is not the only thing criticised by the author, his physical appearance and his bourgeois habits are ridiculed to extremes. After Zapata has finished his 'cognac and cigar' and has fallen asleep, Inés examines his garments: 'black trousers with silver buttons', 'embroidered sombrero with its horsehair tassel, the lovely Dutch linen shirt. The

⁸⁹ Sandra Cisneros, 'Eyes of Zapata' in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 85-113 (p. 100).

⁹⁰ Michael Meyer and William L. Sherman point out that the figure of the *soldadera* has not received enough attention: 'The soldaderas were more than camp followers. They provided feminine companionship, to be sure, but because neither the federal army nor the rebel armies provided commissary service, they foraged for food, cooked, washed, and in the absence of more competent medical service, nursed the wounded and buried the dead.' (p. 555), in *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

fine braid stitching on the border of your charro jacket, [...].'(p. 85) His hands are 'too pretty for a man. Elegant hands, graceful hands, fingers smelling sweet as your Havanas' (p. 85); his voice is 'thin and light as a woman's, almost delicate.'(p. 106) These subtle comments suggest that Zapata was closer to a bourgeois with dandy looks than to the rough, revolutionary icon we are so used to.⁹¹ By feminising a classic epitome of masculinity and bravery, Cisneros by implication subverts the Chicano movement's notion of Mexican manliness.

In the short story 'One Holy Night' Cisneros once again brings down from its pedestal another key aspect of the Chicano movement. This time, she criticizes the appropriation of a native ancestry by certain individuals who believe this somehow gives them an interesting allure. In this story, a man assumes royal Mayan descent in order to seduce a young girl. Pretending to be called 'Chaq Uxmal Paloquín' and to belong to 'an ancient line of Mayan kings', he abandons the protagonist after having a sexual relationship with her. The young girl, easily impressed by his supposedly indigenous lineage, narrates: 'He said [...] past and future are all the same to his people', 'Boy Baby brushes my hair and talks to me in his strange language because I like to hear it. What I like to hear him tell is how he is Chaq, Chaq of the people of the sun, Chaq of the temples [...].'⁹² After a sudden disappearance, the protagonist finds out that he is a serial killer, and that 'Boy Baby is thirty-seven years old. His name is Chato which means fat-face. There is no Mayan blood.'(p. 33) In this way, Cisneros expresses that claiming an indigenous identity can sometimes have a self-fashioning aim rather than a political one.

⁹¹ See Maythee G. Rojas's analysis on this story where she argues that Zapata's bourgeois life style is contrasted to Inés's underprivileged life. Rojas claims that Inés - standing for the revolutionaries' silent partner - is posited as the true rebel in this story. See 'Cisneros's "Terrible" Women: Recuperating the Erotic as a Feminist Source in "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Eyes of Zapata". *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 20:3 (1999), 135-57.

⁹² Sandra Cisneros, 'One Holy Night' in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, pp. 27-35 (p. 29).

Chicanas' artistic response to masculinist literary and historical accounts also expands into the realm of film. Rosa Linda Fregoso reveals how *Chicana* the documentary directed by Sylvia Morales is a response to Luis Valdez filmic adaptation of the poem *I am Joaquín*. She states: 'Ten years would pass after the production of *I am Joaquín* before a Chicana produced a film that patterned the tendency to tell "all" of Chicano history in one filmic statement.'⁹³ Fregoso explains that the film's focus on women such as La Malinche or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 're-invents a lineage for Chicanas.'⁹⁴

Angie Chabram-Dernersesian notes that the Chicano/a cultural subject is centred around male literary identities such as : '[...] el pachuco, el vato loco, el cholo, the Aztec, the militant Chicano, the existential Chicano, the political Chicano, the precocious Chicano, the Jungian Chicano-o-o-o, and mostly authoritarian fathers.'⁹⁵ Until the emergence of Chicana writing, Chicano/a cultural identity was imagined solely in a masculine language. The array of female figures presented by Chicana writers such as the mestiza, La Malinche or Coatlicue are a response to these man-centred representations, and an attempt to broaden Chicano/a subjectivity.

Re-writing feminism

Chicanas' recreation of empowering Mexican role models has a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it asserts their active role within Mexican and Chicano history. On the other hand, it counteracts the marginalisation suffered by Chicanas from the white feminist movement. When analysing Chicana writing, we must take into account that their work also functions as a counter-narrative to white women's literature by addressing the realities of women from an ethnic point of view.

⁹³ *The Bronze Screen*, p. 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 18.

⁹⁵ Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, 'I Throw Punches for My Race, but I don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us-Chica-nos (Girls, Us)/Chicanas-into the Movement Script', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Laurence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 81-95 (p. 82).

As a result of the frustration and discontent felt by women of colour with the white feminist movement, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa published in 1981 the groundbreaking collection of essays *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*. In the introduction these two writers explain that the book aims to draw attention to '[...] the ways in which Third World women derive a feminist political theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience' and on 'the destructive and demoralizing effects of racism in the women's movement'.⁹⁶ The writers included in this collection criticize the ways in which white feminists assume that all women suffer the same type of oppression and ignore the racial and class related oppressions undergone by coloured women in the U.S. This volume responds to the necessity to create a theory that reflects the coloured women's work. The fact that the theorists (Moraga and Anzaldúa) are also the writers themselves reveals the lack of critical work produced on Chicana writing at the time. In this book, Latinas, African-American, Asian-American and Native-American female writers articulate their views on feminism and their intentions to create a *bridge* between white and coloured women. Addressing Mary Daly, Audre Lorde expresses her objective: 'As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other.'⁹⁷ Homophobia and the triple oppression suffered by lesbian women of colour are subjects also tackled in this volume. Gloria Anzaldúa offers these observations in her essay 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers':

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The *lesbian* of color is not only invisible, she

⁹⁶ 'Introduction', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 2nd edn (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), pp. xxiii-xxvi (p. xxiv).

⁹⁷ Audre Lorde, 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, pp. 94-101 (p. 96).

doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.⁹⁸

Another pioneering volume which reflects Chicanas' willingness to theorize feminism from a coloured woman's perspective is *Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* published in 1990 by Gloria Anzaldúa. Although it can be considered a follow-up volume to *This Bridge* and it also arises from coloured women's frustrating experiences with white feminists, the addressee has changed. Anzaldúa explains the purpose of *Haciendo Caras*:

Contrary to the norm, it does not address itself *primarily* to whites, but invites them to "listen in" to women-of-color talking to each other and, in some instances, to and "against" white people. It attempts to explore our realities and identities [...] and unbuild and rebuild them. [...] Our writings and scholarship, built in earlier waves of feminism, continue to critique and to directly address dominant culture and white feminism. But that is not all we do; these pieces attest to the fact that more and more we are concentrating on our own projects, our own agendas, our own theories.⁹⁹

The emphasis is not placed so much now in building bridges between white women and coloured women, but rather between the coloured women themselves.¹⁰⁰ The book suggests that since coloured female writing has gained recognition in the past years there is no further need to explain their political goal to the dominant. The book and its title -*Making Face, Making Soul*- implies that it is time to construct and articulate coloured women's identity.

Chicanas feel obliged to stress their gender and sexuality in a Chicano/a context, but their race and class is emphasized when confronting the white feminist tradition. Chicana writers have played a crucial role in re-defining U.S. feminism,

⁹⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers', in *This Bridge Called My Back*, pp. 165-74 (p. 165).

⁹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Haciendo caras, una entrada', in *Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras. Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), pp. xv-xxviii (p. xviii).

¹⁰⁰ In an interview with AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa explains the differences between *This Bridge* and *Haciendo caras*: '[...] in *Bridge* we were reacting against the white feminists' theories and words, it was more of a reactive kind of book. *Haciendo Caras* feels to me like - yes, that part is still there but now we've gone off on our own paths and we're utilizing that energy to work things out amongst ourselves. We're still bridging with white women, but a lot of the energy is just staying here.' 'Making Choices: Writing, Spirituality, and the Political. An Interview with AnaLouise Keating (1991)', in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, pp. 151-76 (p. 155).

gay writing and Chicano/a studies. The 1980s and beginnings of 1990s represent a period when Chicanas present a different perspective of the Chicano/a experience by foregrounding issues related to gender. The work of writers such as Anzaldúa and Moraga reflects how it is possible not only to articulate a Chicano/a identity from a gendered point of view but also from a gay one. This early period of women's writing also shows that the Chicanas' experience is somehow generalized and represented by a collective 'we'. After this period of assertion, the 1990s represents a time where more subjective, individual voices are heard. This new attitude will be clear in the following chapters since they analyse works by Chicana writers that enrich the Chicano/a canon by exploring issues such as mass culture or religion.¹⁰¹

The Latino Boom

After a body of work that stressed a strong sense of ethnic identity during the 1960s and 1970s, the following two decades saw the emergence of more individual voices such as that of Chicanas and gays. Women writers such as Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga, as well as writers such as Acosta or Rodríguez presented a counter-narrative to the Chicano/a representations of community and sexuality. As I have previously explained, many women authors' attempts to disassociate their writing from a movement-oriented ideology failed due to the enveloping influence that the rhetorical language and mythology had played during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite this, the 1980s and 1990s are generally seen as the era when Chicano/a writing moved away from the essential notions of ethnic identity towards a more personal vision. These years are also known as a period when Chicano/a (and Latino/a) literature became popular and entered the mainstream. This literary

¹⁰¹ In a recent conference, Cherrie Moraga argued that it is time that Chicanas ceased to generalise their experience and to speak as 'We' and started to express their own individual experiences, i.e., to talk from an 'I' point of view. That way, she claimed, Chicanas will be able to come together and realise the commonalities of their experiences. 'A Ceremony of Remembering: Staging the Story Xicana', paper given at the *III International Congress of Chicano/a Literature*, 21-23 May 2002, Malaga (Spain).

production benefited from what is generally known as the 'Latino Boom' that began in the 1980s, an interest in all aspects of Latino culture.¹⁰² The attention directed to Latino/a culture in the United States is part of the recognition granted to ethnic minorities during this professed postmodernist era. The acknowledgment of a multicultural society means that U.S. ethnic literary texts by writers such as African-American Toni Morrison or Chicana Sandra Cisneros are abundantly found not only in bookshops but also in university syllabi.¹⁰³ But many critics have questioned the mainstream's *apparent* embrace of minorities' cultural production. Nelly Richard for instance distrusts this alleged recognition of the 'margins':

We also need to *doubt* this new "centrality" of the margins that suddenly recompenses categories up until now out of circulation, such as the feminine or the Latin American. Feminism [...] and Latin Americanism [...] are categories relegated by the new movement towards the borders of the center culture. But women and the Third World are categories more spoken for by postmodernity, without obliging the cultural institution to loosen its discursive monopoly over the right to speak, without ceding to them the much greater right to become autonomous subjects of enunciation, [...].¹⁰⁴

The interest in the 'other' or the 'different', runs parallel with its transformation into an exotic object to be incorporated into mainstream culture. The cultural production of the minorities enters the mainstream, but this latter always has control over it. This is also the argument put forward by bell hooks when she claims that 'Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture'.¹⁰⁵ According to this critic, the fetishization of the other is designed to appease marginalized groups eager for recognition as well those discontent with U.S. imperialism.

¹⁰² Although my thesis concentrates on Chicano/a literature, I need to deal with the Latino Boom since it has partly helped it become successful.

¹⁰³ Ann DuCille believes the incorporation of minorities' literatures into the academy is another expression of the commodification of the 'Other'. DuCille argues that the rise of postcolonial studies in the U.S. academia is tied to its ability to avoid discussing the U.S.' own racial problems: 'Unlike African American and other local narratives of marginality, postcolonial is being figured as a universal master narrative containing all difference.' In *Skin Trade* (London: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 126.

¹⁰⁴ Nelly Richard, 'Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-Centering', *boundary 2*, 20:3 (1993), 156-61, (p. 160).

¹⁰⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 21.

Similar comments have been articulated regarding the commodification of Latino culture. In his usual satirical vein, Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña describes the so-called 'Latino Boom':

What exactly is the "Latino Boom"?

The artists answer (choose one of the following)

- a) a kind of smoke screen to hide reality
- b) a prestidigitation act to distract us from politics
- c) the green light for us to become rich and famous
- d) a major opportunity to infiltrate and speak from within
- e) a contemporary version of the "good neighbor" policy toward America
- f) the logical result of the Chicano and Nuyorican movements
- g) the caprice of a Madison Avenue tycoon¹⁰⁶

In this short and incisive list, Gómez-Peña touches on the significant issues surrounding the contemporary fascination with Latino/a culture: whilst the Latino Boom allows Latinos/as to become visible, it also concentrates its attention on those aspects that can easily be appropriated and mass-consumed. This alleged interest in Latin America ensures that one is now familiar with Mexican Frida Kahlo's life and work but the political conflict existing in Chiapas is unknown to many.¹⁰⁷ Latino/a culture is allowed into the mainstream as long as we are dealing with exotic and digestible aspects of it, that is, aspects that do not threaten the mainstream's authority or status.¹⁰⁸ As Gómez-Peña claims: 'They want ranchero music sung by Linda Ronstandt, not Lola Beltrán (the queen of Mexican ranchero music), the Mexicorama look of *The Milagro Beanfield War* and not the acidity of Chicano experimental video'. (p. 51) The partial admiration for the Latino/a also applies to social issues as Gomez-Peña makes clear:

¹⁰⁶ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1993), p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Chiapas is a state situated in the southeast of Mexico. It has a substantial native population who has historically lived in underdeveloped conditions. In 1994, a group called the Zapatista National Liberation Army, commanded by the masked Subcomandante Marcos, rebelled demanding improvements on the situation of the Chiapas native population. To this day, this group remains active and is now maintaining conversations with the new Mexican President Fox.

¹⁰⁸ The recent success of Latino/a artists such as Ricky Martin is a perfect example of this digestible aspect of Latino-ness. Whilst they may seem as representing United States' Latino/a population, their music as well as looks is a product of the United States mainstream culture. For instance, Mexican singer Fernando Olvera (from the group Mana) has voiced his concerns about the way in which Ricky Martin is seen as representative of Latin American music: ' "Ricky Martin is a friend of mine, but his music isn't the real thing.... Latin music is an ocean of sensation that Anglos haven't yet discovered. I'm concerned. A lot of things that come to America end up like Ricky Martin." ' quoted in John Patterson, 'Spanglish made easy', *The Guardian*, 3rd June 1999, p. 17.

There is a fatal discrepancy between the colourful image of prosperity broadcast by the boom and the sordid reality that no one wishes to address. Today, Latinos have the highest school drop-out rate. We are the largest population in the prisons in the Southwest. The majority of babies born with AIDS are Latino and African American. Police brutality, alcoholism, and drugs are quotidian realities in our communities. [...] So, what exactly is booming? [...] We want understanding, not publicity. (p. 52)

Gómez-Peña is not the only one concerned with the double standards applied with regards to the vast Latino/a population by the mainstream. Celeste Olalquiaga argues that 'Latinization takes place mainly through commodification, corporations having rapidly understood the market potential of both Latinos and Latin iconography.'¹⁰⁹ The extensive manner in which the Latino/a subject is commodified for mass-consumption has also lead a number of Latino/a artists to denounce it via comedy. Particularly representative of this move is the Chicano-Latino theatrical group Culture Clash whose plays' main objective is to satirize the ways in which Latino/a culture is appropriated for consumerism.¹¹⁰ Their play 'The Mission' deals with three Latino actors who, infuriated by the lack of opportunities given to Latino artists, kidnap the Spanish singer Julio Iglesias in order to obtain a chance to perform on national television. The group has already unsuccessfully auditioned to take part in a television program celebrating the beatification of Father Junipero Serra.¹¹¹ In the audition, they are turned down because they 'don't look Hispanic enough', but 'too Chicano'.¹¹² By making fun of Julio Iglesias, -'I am changing my name to sell more records. I am translating my name to July Churches' (p. 43) - the text transmits

¹⁰⁹ Olalquiaga, p. 82.

Other critics who have pointed out the relation between ethnic literature's success and commodification are Ellen McCracken in her book *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999). With respects to the commodification of African American minority see Ann Duccille's *Skin Trade* where in her chapter 'Toy Theory' she discusses Mattel's attempts at 'ethnicizing' the doll Barbie.

¹¹⁰ Culture Clash is formed by Ricardo Salinas, Richard Montoya and Herbert Siguenza.

¹¹¹ Ricardo Salinas explains the reasons they chose to include Father Junipero Serra in their play: 'While we were writing *The Mission*, there was a campaign to make Father Junipero Serra a saint. Some thought the Pope should canonize him for being the founder of the California missions and converting the Indians to Christianity. We thought otherwise. According to some documentation, Father Junipero Serra was no saint. He was a perfect target for us to lampoon. Incidentally, he still hasn't reached sainthood.' In *Culture Clash. Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), pp. 6-7.

¹¹² Culture Clash, 'The Mission', in *Culture Clash. Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy*, pp. 8-56 (p. 41).

the apprehension surrounding the fact that a Spanish artist represents the Latino/a minority. Another target of the group is the mass culture commodification of Latin American icons such as Frida Kahlo and Che Guevara. In the play 'The Mission', during an audition, one of the actors tries to please the producers by saying: 'First of all, let me congratulate the producers at ABC-TV for doing the mini-series on "The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo."' ¹¹³ During the play 'A Bowl of Beings' one of the characters suffers an identity crisis and utters a long speech in which he complains: '[...] - have you heard Madonna wants to play Frida Kahlo in a movie, man. [...] I hope they let a Chicano play Trotsky at least.' ¹¹⁴ In the same play, the character Chuy performs black magic in an attempt to revive the revolutionary fervour that inspired the Chicano movement. From this experiment, the revolutionary leader Che Guevara appears, only to be disheartened by the news that he '[...] inspired a whole generation of yuppies, [...] made a handsome silk-screen poster' and 'had some commercial impact'. (p. 89) Through parody, Culture Clash condemns the appropriation and fetishization of Latin American culture by mainstream culture. At the heart of their criticism lies the contradictory and hypocritical nature of appropriating icons that represent a rebellious character whilst they are turned into mass-consumption objects. However, the viability of Culture Clash's project is destabilized by the remarks made by David Román regarding the ways in which homosexuality is portrayed in its work. Román argues that this theatre group gives a homophobic representation of gays in their plays: 'Imagined gays were attacked in one scene, raped in another [...] and lesbians, as usual, were not to be found. AIDS was presented as a threat posed by gays and women to unsettle the family and *la*

¹¹³ 'The Mission', p. 32.

¹¹⁴ Culture Clash, 'A Bowl of Beings', pp. 63-106 (p. 95).

raza.¹¹⁵ Román suggests that even though Culture Clash attacks the ways in which the mainstream stereotypes Latinos/as, it nevertheless misrepresents the Latino/a subject as homophobic.

Despite the drawbacks of this ethnicity fervour, the market potential of Latinos/as has certainly contributed to its publishing production.¹¹⁶ The interest in Chicano/a culture benefits the publication of writers Maria Helena Viramontes, Alfredo Vea or Graciela Limón. But, on many occasions, the success of these writers is attributable to their inscription as bearers of 'authentic Mexican culture'. Their market potential also ensures these writers' work is compared to that of the bona fide Latin American Boom authors such as Isabel Allende or Gabriel García Márquez, as well as to the literary device magical realism. The extent to which Chicano/a writers resemble the authentic Latin American phenomenon determines in many cases their market success. Karen Christian notes that it is assumed that 'García Márquez and his Latin American contemporaries are the standard to which U.S. Latina/o writing should be held.' (p. 122) In her book *Show and Tell*, this critic devotes a whole chapter to the influence of Latin American writers in Latino/a fiction and to the blurring boundaries between parody, imitation and influence. Although Christian has already deliberated on the impact of Latin American writing on Latino/a authors, I intend to expand this discussion by setting it within a larger debate on the commodification of Latino/a culture and to talk more specifically about Chicano/a literature.

Ellen McCracken also points out the ways in which Latino/a literature is measured up against Latin American literature, especially: '[...] the work of Gabriel

¹¹⁵ David Román, 'Teatro Viva!: Latino Performance and the Politics of AIDS in Los Angeles' in *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, ed. by Emilie L. Bergman and Paul Julian Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 346-69.

¹¹⁶ In her book *New Latina Narrative*, Ellen McCracken explains that Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* success is partly due to a promotion that articulated the book and the writer as exotic and authentically Mexican. But, as McCracken argues, the narrative questions and deconstructs essential notions of cultural authenticity as well as criticizes commodity culture.

García Márquez and Latin American magical realism, two of the most common reductive modes by which the U.S. cultural mainstream has appropriated Latin American fiction of recent decades as a palatable Third World commodity.¹¹⁷ In his article 'Two Views of the Boom: North and South', John S. Brushwood expands on the misconceptions attached to the Latin American Boom. He argues that many Latin American writers such as Juan Rulfo are wrongly associated with the Boom, whilst this literary phenomenon in reality began in the early sixties. Another misunderstanding pointed out by Brushwood is the tendency to attach the term 'magic realism', 'a term used very loosely by literary specialists'¹¹⁸ to this set of writers.

Before expanding on the impact of this literary trend on Chicano/a writers, I will shortly clarify the origins and uses of the term 'magical realism'.¹¹⁹ The definition of this term is a source of much controversy. The term was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to postimpressionist painting. In 1949, Alejo Carpentier employed the term 'lo real maravilloso', the marvellous real as arising from 'an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality. [...]'.¹²⁰ In 1954, Angel Flores argued that magical realism is Latin America's 'authentic expression' and that the practitioners manifest a 'preoccupation with style and [...] [a] transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal.'¹²¹ He also contended that 'Time exists in

¹¹⁷ McCracken, *New Latina Narrative*, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ John S. Brushwood, 'Two Views of the Boom: North and South', in *Latin American Literary Review*, 15.29 (1987), 13-31, (p. 19).

¹¹⁹ It is not my intention to give a full insight into magical realism but provide a brief description of the term, since this allows a discussion of its use by Chicano/a writers. For a more profound understanding of this device, refer to the compilation of articles on this subject in *Magic Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995).

¹²⁰ Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvellous Real in America', in *Magical Realism*, pp. 75-88 (p.86).

¹²¹ Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' in *Magical Realism*, pp. 109-17 (p. 114).

a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality.'¹²² Flores's definition of the term has been questioned by critics such as Luis Leal, claiming that magic realists attempt 'to seize the mystery that breathes behind things.'¹²³ Even though much ambiguity surrounds this term, it is generally believed that magical realism captures the tragic socio-political realities of the Latin American population as well as the indigenist cultural past of the continent, a combination that leads to a perception of reality that differs from the Western one. A humorous and satirical use of the language also play a role in magical realism. Writers such as Maria Amparo Escandón refutes the validity of this term and embraces instead 'realidad magica' - magical reality -, arguing that there is no need to invent fantastical events since 'la realidad latinoamericana es ya de hecho mágica. Basta con mirar alrededor.'¹²⁴ (Latin American reality is in fact magical. One just has to look around.) I am interested in how this literary phenomenon has become representative of Latin American literature and consequently of Chicano/a literature.

Chicano/a writers acknowledge the influence that Latin American literature exerts in their writing, from literary traditions to styles.¹²⁵ The effect of Latin American literature on Chicano/a writers is for instance evident in Ron Arias's 1975 novel *The Road of Tamazunchale*.¹²⁶ The dying protagonist Fausto leaps out of reality into a fantasy world where he travels from Los Angeles to Cuzco, Peru, and where individuals from his past such as his dead wife reappear. The confusion created by the blurring between reality, hallucinations and fantasy has lead critics to

¹²² Ibid. p. 115

¹²³ Luis Leal, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature' in *Magical Realism*, pp. 119-124 (p. 123).

¹²⁴ Interview with María Amparo Escandón in <http://www.santitos.com/espanol/interviews/interviews.html>

¹²⁵ See for instance José Antonio Villareal's and Miguel Méndez's interviews with Juan Bruce-Novoa in *Chicano Authors* where they discuss the influence of Mexican literature in Chicano/a writing.

¹²⁶ Ron Arias, *The Road to Tamazunchale* (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1987)

associate this novel with the magic realism device.¹²⁷ Eliud Martínez contends that this novel 'exemplifies admirably how fundamentally close are the Chicano and the Latin American cultural experiences [...]' (p. 10) Arias acknowledges the impact of Latin American writing in chapter seven of his book where he narrates the discovery of a wetback's corpse by the community. This chapter is a clear re-writing of Gabriel García Márquez's short story 'El ahogado más hermoso del mundo' ('The handsomest drowned man of the world') which recounts the fascination provoked by the arrival of a corpse in a village. This dead man - renamed David - wields such magnetism that the people invent him a past and ultimately an identity. In Arias's rendition, Mrs. Renteria takes care of the corpse and imagines how their life together would have been:

[...] she passed the daylight hours at David's feet, listening, speaking, giving her secrets. And not once did he notice her splotchy hands, the graying hair nor the plain, uninspired face. During the warm afternoons David would take her out, arm in arm, to stroll through the lush gardens of his home, somewhere far away to the south. He fed her candies, gave her flowers and eventually spoke of eternity and a breeze that never dies. At night she would come to him dressed as a dream, a sprig of jasmine in her hair, then lay by his side until dawn, awake to his every whisper and touch. (pp. 77-78)

This segment is reminiscent of this passage taken from García Márquez's story:

Pensaban que si aquel hombre magnífico hubiera vivido en el pueblo, su casa habría tenido las puertas más anchas, el techo más alto y el piso más firme, [...], y su mujer habría sido la más feliz. ... Lo compararon en secreto con sus propios hombres, pensando que no serían capaces de hacer en toda una vida lo que aquél era capaz de hacer en una noche, [...].¹²⁸

In Arias's rewriting of Marquez's story the corpse belongs to a wetback, an illegal immigrant, thus incorporating into the narrative distinctive socio-political realities pertaining to the Latino/a community. Arias's novel is an original acknowledgement of García Márquez's oeuvre although critics such as Catherine Bartlett maintain an unfavourable appraisal. In her article 'Magical Realism: the

¹²⁷ Eliud Martínez, 'Ron Arias' "The Road to Tamazunchale": Cultural Inheritance and Literary Expression', in *The Road to Tamazunchale*, pp. 9-24 (p. 11).

¹²⁸ Gabriel García Márquez, 'El ahogado más hermoso del mundo', in *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndida y de su abuela desalmada (Siete cuentos)* (Barcelona: Ed. Barral, 1972), pp. 49-56.

'They thought that if that magnificent man had lived in the village, his house would have had the widest doors, the highest ceiling and the most solid floor, [...] and his wife would have been the happiest. They secretly compared him with their own men, thinking that they would not be able to do what that man was capable of doing in one night, [...]' (my translation)

Latin American Influence on Modern Chicano Writers', Bartlett discusses the numerous references and influences of Latin American writers such as Julio Cortázar and Borges that exist in Arias's novel, concluding that it fails 'to create a work that transcends obvious imitation.'¹²⁹

Without reaching this level of allusion, other Chicano/a writers are willing to recognize the impact of Latin American literature on their work. Sandra Cisneros acknowledges the influence of the 'Latin American male boom' on Chicano/a writers and admits that she is inspired by Manuel Puig 'for his compassion' and by Juan Rulfo 'for his rhythms and what he's doing with voices.'¹³⁰ But Cisneros also cites Spanish Merce Rodoreda and Anglo American Ellis Taylor as having an inspirational role in her writing. Ana Castillo's novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is influenced by Julio Cortázar's novel *Rayuela*, especially '[...] his ability to play with language and structure'. She explains: '[...] I dedicated that book to him [...] because he was another person that I felt was the master in the particular form of writing that I was aspiring to.'¹³¹ Tey Diana Rebolledo goes as far as arguing that the Latin American testimonial literary tradition has had impact on Chicana writing since it 'also function[s] within cultures that have silenced them [...], this notion of testifying and remembering in order to achieve "presence" is seen throughout their writing.'¹³² There is no doubt that Latin American literature plays a great influence on Chicano/a writing, but unfortunately the former also operates as the criterion to which the latter should submit. This is the attitude adopted by publishing houses that market Chicano/a works as representatives of magical realism works or García Márquez's style. The cover reviews' references are particularly illustrative of this strategy. The

¹²⁹ Catherine Bartlett, 'Magical Realism: The Latin American Influence on Modern Chicano Writers', *Confluencia*, 1:2 (1986), pp. 27-37 (p. 33).

¹³⁰ 'Interview with Sandra Cisneros' in *Interviews with Writers of the post-colonial world*, ed. by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), pp. 286-306, (p. 303).

¹³¹ Ana Castillo, 'A MELUS Interview by Elsa Saeta', *MELUS*, 22.3 (1997), 133-49 (p. 136).

¹³² Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 119.

front cover of Cecile Pineda's *The Love Queen of the Amazon* reads: 'A feminist picaresque adventure, a cross between Fielding's Tom Jones and Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude.' –Philadelphia Inquirer'.¹³³ The back cover stresses the novel's exoticism by quoting the Boston Globe's review that claims that the book 'is fathered by some randy Latin American magical realist'. Alfredo Vea Jr's novel *The Silver Cloud Café* is subjected to a similar treatment of authentication by having the front cover state: 'Blends García Márquez with Raymond Chandler... Big-Hearted, Magical ...' - San Francisco Chronicle.¹³⁴ Another authentication process involves quoting a genuine Latin American Boom writer, Isabel Allende, 'author of *The House of the Spirits* and *Paula*', who is cited as describing the book as 'A powerful and enchanting story....'. Ana Castillo's tragic tale *So Far from God* is reviewed in the first page by John Nichols as 'Haunting...surreal ...steeped in pungent folklore, with a flavor like Hieronymous Bosh [sic] meets Frieda [sic] Kahlo and Diego Rivera...'. In this case, the authenticating label arises from Mexican art. The marketing of these books manifests the extent to which the stereotypes associated with Latin American literature as well as with the population – exotic, folkloric, mysterious – become the path to a publishing success.

But, even though the mainstream persists in construing Chicano/a writing as a commodity, the writers themselves have to take some share of the blame. Despite the impact that Latin American literature has on their work, one can't help thinking that some Chicano/a writers deliberately imitate the Boom writers' style and subject matter, as if the presence of these markers will ensure the entrance into highbrow literature. Graciela Limón's *The Day of the Moon*'s plot is so painfully similar to Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* that it can't be simply considered an acknowledgment of the Chilean writer's influence on her work. *The Day of the Moon*

¹³³ Cecile Pineda, *The Love Queen of the Amazon* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992)

¹³⁴ Alfredo Vea, Jr., *The Silver Cloud Café* (New York: Plume, 1997)

begins in Los Angeles in 1965 with Flavio Betancourt remembering his life. Betancourt is a wealthy *hacendado* (landowner) in Mexico who marries Velia Carmelita but his inflexible and reclusive ways prevents the development of a good relationship in the marriage.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, his wife maintains a sexual relationship with her sister-in-law Brígida, only to die whilst giving birth to Isadora. As a child, Isadora becomes good friends with Jerónimo, son of one of the Rarámuris that works for Betancourt. Aware of the relationship of his daughter with an indigenous boy, he sends her away to be educated in a convent. After her return, Isadora agrees to marry the partner her father chooses for her, a white man. But when the marriage breaks down, Isadora maintains a relationship with Jerónimo and has a child with him. Her infuriated and humiliated father has him murdered. Isadora attempts to kill her father but fails and is sent to a mental institution. Her daughter, Alondra, years later traces back her family's tragic history and achieves a spiritual union with her dead mother. She embraces both her indigenous and European ancestry, symbolizing the reconciliation that her grandfather never achieved. The similarity of the plot elements to *The House of Spirits* are too obvious to ignore: stern patriarch, affair between wife and sister-in-law, daughter's defiance of father by maintaining relationship with a native (who is the son of one of the patron's original workers), spiritual bond between mother and daughter ... One can easily conclude that Limón's novel is modelled on *The House of Spirits*, not influenced by it.

There are other aspects from Latin American literature that influence Chicano/a literature. In a passage from *So Far from God* entitled 'Three of La Loca's Favorite Recipes Just to Whet Your Appetite', the introvert character La Loca teaches her sister Fe as well as the reader how to cook Mexican dishes such as *posole* or *carne adovada*. The meticulous advice given on the food's preparation in a sense reflects

¹³⁵ Graciela Limón, *The Day of the Moon* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1999)

the *authentic Mexican-ness* of the book: 'First, she was told by La Loca, she must prepare the corn as she had taught to make nistal for tamales, but she should not grind it! For every pound of stew pork, one cup of the whole nistal corn was boiled until half done, and then the meat was added [...].'¹³⁶ The space of the kitchen and the act of cooking enable the family to bond as they chatter. This passage provokes a *déjà vu* moment in the reader by recalling Laura Esquivel's famous novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, where cooking allows the main character, Tita, to express her repressed feelings.¹³⁷

Ilan Stavans has made similar comments with respects to Puerto Rican writer Rosario Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon*. Stavans believes her work 'suffers from what I call "the Macondo syndrome," a condition through which writers seem bent on replicating *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.'¹³⁸ Roland Walter has dedicated a whole book to the examination of magical realism in three Chicano novels: Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Orlando Romero's *Nambé-Year One*, and Miguel Méndez's *The Dream of Santa María de las Piedras*. Although he concludes that Chicanos/as' articulation of magical realism differs from its Latin American counterpart due to cultural differences, he argues that it represents 'a fusion of two conflicting views of reality, the rational mode which is centered upon reasoning [...], and the magical mode which is centered on the unconscious, dreams and imagination [...].'¹³⁹ Although his study of this literary style acknowledges the specific socio-political circumstances surrounding the Chicano/a experience, Walter doesn't question the genuineness of its use. On the contrary, Catherine Bartlett does not adopt such a benevolent approach towards the study of Latin American stylistic

¹³⁶ Ana Castillo, *So Far from God* (New York: Plume, 1994), p. 167.

¹³⁷ Karen Christian also notes the similarity between this passage and Esquivel's novel: 'It is one of the voices that the narrator employs to present her encyclopaedia of Chicano/Latino culture.' (p. 143)

¹³⁸ Ilan Stavans, 'Rosario Ferré's Macondo', in *The Riddle of Cuntinflas. Essays on Hispanic Popular Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), pp. 125-28 (p. 127).

¹³⁹ Roland Walter, *Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1993), p. 136.

techniques in Chicano/a writing. Bartlett is adamant in stressing that Romero's *Nambe-Year One* inadequately mimics the stereotypical style and techniques associated with Latin American fiction: 'the novel finally fails to approximate anything but a flowery, sugar-coated imitation.' She expands:

It becomes painfully obvious from the outset that Romero has consciously borrowed the theme of "solitude" from Octavio Paz and Gabriel García Márquez. It almost seems that Romero mentioned the word "solitude" on at least every other page of the 173-page novel. [...] His prose often reeks of the intoxicating sugar-filled language that leaves one feeling dizzy and not in the least satisfied. Some passages, [...], border on the cliché and perpetuate outdated stereotypes. (p. 28)

Criticising the glaring imitation of certain Boom devices does not imply that these writers do not have a right to pay homage to authors such as García Márquez, or acknowledge the similar cultural background from which they come. But, the level of allusion manifests the extent to which these authors feel pressurized to reproduce the stereotypical devices associated with their literature.

The harsh criticism articulated by academics such as Bartlett, Christian or Stavans on Chicano/a/Latino/a writing indicates a willingness to produce a consistent and valuable body of critique. Back in 1980 Ricardo Sánchez had protested against a protecting attitude towards Chicano/a literature: 'The nicety of our academics is blight. Our fear of offending each mother's son of us must cease.'¹⁴⁰ Even though his call for 'real criticism' is perceived in the disapproving words of these critics, it is surprising that the bald duplication of the Boom clichéd style in certain Chicano/a writing hasn't been noted more often. I believe this results from a strong sense of community that prevents critics to censure certain texts as much as they deserve. Chicano/a writing is expected to express a strong sense of ethnic pride and to be community-oriented. In some cases, ethnic pride is translated as an imitation of the Latin American Boom style, creating a clichéd body of work.

¹⁴⁰ 'Interview with Ricardo Sanchez', in *Chicano Authors*, p. 233.

Representing the community

Even though Chicano/a literature has achieved a certain degree of recognition within mainstream culture, this writing tends to be seen as representative of the whole group. This is a problematic that has been voiced by many Chicano/a writers. Even though Sandra Cisneros feels honoured 'to be speaking for the community,'¹⁴¹ few writers welcome this designation. The issue of representation becomes more complicated when dealing with lesbian Chicana writing. Cherrie Moraga claims she feels pressurized to offer a writing 'representative' of the race, the sex, the sexuality – or at all costs to avoid that.¹⁴² Similarly, Anzaldúa expresses her concern at being a 'symbol of representation' of Chicana writing. She expands:

I have the same kinds of problems with the label "lesbian writer" that I do with the label "Chicana writer". *Si, soy Chicana*, and therefore a Chicana writer. But when critics label me thus, they're looking not at the person but at the writing, as though the writing is Chicana writing instead of the writer being Chicana. By forcing the label on the writing they marginalise it.¹⁴³

Similar dilemmas of representation have taken place with other minority literatures. In a recent interview, Amy Tan reveals her apprehension when her work is read as a way to understand the Chinese population:

Me asusta que la gente utilice mi trabajo como un método para conocer a los chinos. Y yo no quiero jugar ese papel. Creo que mis personajes son bastante raros y no representan a nadie, excepto quizás a mi familia. Esta no es la forma de ver a todo el grupo.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the critic David Palumbo-Liu manifests a preoccupation towards the employment of ethnic literary texts as 'authentic, unmediated representations of ethnicity.'¹⁴⁵ Recent literary and critical texts suggest that ethnicity should cease to be seen as the only oppression that affects minorities. In this way, they call to

¹⁴¹ 'Interview with Sandra Cisneros', *Crossroads*, 31 (May 1993), p. 12.

¹⁴² Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. vi.

¹⁴³ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'To(o) Queer the Writer – Loca, escritora y chicana', in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), pp. 262-76 (pp. 264-65).

¹⁴⁴ Amy Tan, 'Interview with Amy Tan by Isabel Piquer', *El País*, 19 June 2001, available at <http://www.elpais.es>.

'I am scared by the fact that people use my work as a way to know Chinese people. And I don't want to play that role. I believe my characters are quite strange and they don't represent anybody, except possibly my family. This is not the way to see the whole group.'

¹⁴⁵ David Palumbo-Liu, 'Introduction', in *The Ethnic Canon. Histories, Institutions and Interventions* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 1-27 (p. 12).

consider the notions of gender, sexuality and class as identity positions that can connect groups across racial boundaries. Anzaldúa's work is particularly representative of this appeal. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she articulates the figure of the mestiza as an individual constituted by not only her race but also by class, sexuality and gender. In her work, she refuses to separate or define her concept of race from the other positions of identity that constitute her subjectivity. This argument is made clear in another less known piece of her work entitled 'To(o) Queer the Writer - Loca, escritora y chicana', in which she elaborates on the constraints of the label 'lesbian writer'. Anzaldúa states:

Often I am asked, "What is your primary identity, being lesbian or working-class or Chicana?" In defining or separating the "lesbian" identity from other aspects of identity, I am asked to separate and distinguish all aspects from one another. [...] But to put each in a separate compartment is to put them in contradiction or in isolation, when in actuality they are all constantly in a shifting dialogue/relationship [...]. (p. 267)

In this essay, she recounts an experience that led her to the realization of the importance of class-consciousness in her own work. The writer narrates that during her readings within the white lesbian community, she feels that racist and class oppression issues are barely 'swallowed', whilst in the readings in the Latino/Chicano Mission community she senses that 'they would rather I had checked out my queerness at the door.' (p. 269) However, after obtaining a receptive and warm response from an audience composed of 'colored hippies, straight beats, and non-literary' individuals, she understands that it is the topic of class conflict that enables her to connect with them and feel 'accepted, respected, and valued in a more total way than I had experienced in the "lesbian" or the Mission communities in San Francisco.' (p. 269) A working-class consciousness allows Anzaldúa to establish a stronger connection with a non-Chicano/a or heterosexual public than with those who share her sexual and ethnic difference. More writers are willing to reveal that their working-class background enables them to connect with an audience that may not be from the same ethnic background. This argument is vividly manifested in an

autobiographical essay by Sandra Cisneros. In 'Notes to a Young(er) Writer' Cisneros narrates that when she began writing, she looked up to poet Emily Dickinson as a source of inspiration because 'she never strayed beyond the house and its gardens, but who wrote in her lifetime 1,775 poems.'¹⁴⁶ Dickinson's capacity to write extensively despite her limited experience fascinates Cisneros but later in her life she realizes that Dickinson's life is very dissimilar to hers. The North American poet had an independence guaranteed by education, economic support, and an own space where she could work, but most importantly, she had

a maid, an Irish housekeeper who did, I suspect, most of the household chores. [...] I wonder if Emily Dickinson's Irish housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper. Maybe she was a woman like my mama who could sing a Puccini opera, cook a dinner for nine with only five dollars. [...] Maybe Emily Dickinson's Irish housekeeper had to sacrifice her life so that Emily could live hers locked upstairs in the corner bedroom writing her 1,775 poems. (p. 75)

Cisneros realizes that she shares more commonalities - based on a working-class background - with the anonymous maid than with the famous poet who seemingly led a solitary life outside society.

In a similar vein, Cherrie Moraga confesses in a section from *Loving in the War Years* entitled 'La Guera' (the light-skinned woman) that because of her fair skin, she didn't grow up feeling marginalized. It wasn't until she disclosed her lesbian sexuality that she 'learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.' (p. 52) Her oppressed situation, derived from her sexuality, enables her to connect with her mother who was 'poor, uneducated, and Chicana.' (p. 52) These texts are pointing towards a new direction in Chicano/a studies, and possibly in minority studies since they are highlighting the interrelation of oppressions. These works are linked to Chela Sandoval's call for a 'political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a *tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to

¹⁴⁶ Sandra Cisneros, 'Notes to a Young(er) Writer', in *The Americas Review*, 15:1 (1987), pp. 74-76 (pp. 74-75).

recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted.¹⁴⁷ Although this approach can be considered naïve if we take into account the large number of writers who have denounced the white feminists' lack of interest in the coloured woman's oppression, it is vital to draw attention to the commonality of the experiences between different racial and class groups.

It is noteworthy that whilst white feminists have ignored the complexity of coloured women's oppression, some Chicana writers also make similar mistakes by generalising the white woman's experience. In an interview in which she discusses her literary influences, Ana Castillo oversimplifies white women's literature:

[...] I looked for writers that somehow spoke to my experience, the Latino, Mexican, Spanish. [...] I did not read white women because white women derive from a different literary tradition which is Anglo or English. Instead I read women, for example, like Anais Nin, who is still white but had Spanish ancestry and Latin influence with French and Spanish in her language. And she was Catholic.¹⁴⁸

Castillo contradicts herself by rejecting white women literature but embracing the Spanish 'experience' and reading Anais Nin. 'White' Anais Nin is allowed into her exclusive reading list and *authenticated* by her Catholic background and Spanish ancestry. What makes Castillo assume that other white writers do not share a similar religious or working-class upbringing as hers? ¹⁴⁹ Castillo is eager to denounce the stereotypes and racism that Chicanos/as are subjected to in the United States, but she has no problem promulgating clichés about other nationalities. In *Sapogonia*, the protagonist goes to Spain in search of his Spanish father. After travelling through Spain, the protagonist reaches the conclusion that 'Almost every Spaniard I met was either an aspiring guitarist or a bullfighter who'd missed his calling.' (p. 54) His father turns out to be a drunkard and 'flamenco musician' (p. 54), adding another

¹⁴⁷ Sandoval, p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ Castillo, 'A MELUS Interview by Elsa Saeta', p. 135.

¹⁴⁹ A similar argument is presented by Rosaura Sánchez when she discusses Castillo's work *Massacre of the Dreamers*: 'This gender or "the feminine" is always considered in relation to ethnicity and culture but not always in relation to class. By this calculation Chicanas are said to have more in common with Algerian women than with white women or even Mexican or Chicano men (p. 23). It would follow then that since Third World women of color are not distinguished by class, presumably Castillo feels more in common with an upper-class Algerian woman than with a working-class white woman.' (p. 360)

stereotype to the list of Spanish clichéd figures. Her project is undermined by her dissemination of old clichés about the Spanish population. Although there are writers who are willing to acknowledge the interconnectedness of oppressions, there are others who adopt an essentialist approach towards ethnic identity.

Proud to be fake: embracing *in-authenticity*

I believe the movement's rhetoric and ideology set in a sense a model of Chicanidad, which placed a strong emphasis on issues such as ethnicity and the community.

Bruce-Novoa makes a similar claim in relation to the movement's writers:

Valdez and Gonzales set and/or reaffirmed some precedents for Chicano writing. In their works life assumed a Manichean simplicity: *We* (right and good) versus *They* (wrong and evil); but the *We* was subdivided also into the real *WE*, that is, those Chicanos who supported the political Movement, and the sell-out *We* or *vendidos* who accepted the society as it is¹⁵⁰.

Even though much of the movement's impact has faded and many dissenting voices have been heard, their leaders and writers set an antecedent for subsequent notions of a Chicano/a identity. Discussing the importance of Chicano/a theatre in the past, Cherrie Moraga says that '[...] there was a political movement to support it, that's no longer the case. We are writing as individuals now.'¹⁵¹ Despite the freedom to 'write as individuals', Chicano/a writers are pressurized to articulate a notion of Chicano/a subjectivity centred around the concept of community, politics and tradition among other things. This may be the reason that leads writers such as Limón to imitate the Boom writers style: it locates them closer to Latin America and thus, to cultural authenticity. Sandra Cisneros expresses in an interview the ways in which the movement's discourse set the standards of Chicano/a writing:

When I was writing things like *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* many people felt they had nothing to do with the Chicano Movement. And "Why are you writing that kind of poems?!" People did not consider me a Chicana writer because I wasn't up there standing by my man and writing about the issues that the other Chicano writers were writing about. I was writing about maybe a love affair or the madness of trying to live by myself. Many of us were writing things that were

¹⁵⁰ *Retrospace*, p. 78.

¹⁵¹ Cherrie Moraga, 'Interview', in *Chicana Ways*, pp. 153-72 (p. 164).

not considered revolutionary. It's funny, in retrospect, seeing how much these poems are tied to my culture.¹⁵²

The movement's nationalist discourse, as well as mainstream culture's expectations, have led to discussions surrounding the notion of an authentic Chicano/a identity and writing.¹⁵³ Does a Chicano/a literary work have to discuss themes related to an ethnic identity? Can a novel enter the Chicano/a canon if it deals with Chicano/a identity issues but is written by an Anglo-American man? Danny Santiago raised these questions with the publication of his novel *Famous All Over Town* in 1983.¹⁵⁴ The novel narrates the experiences of the teenager Chato Medina as he grows up in an East Los Angeles barrio. According to Ilan Stavans, the novel obtained the Richard and Hilda Rodenthal Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and 'was described as a stunning debut about adolescent initiation among Latinos.'¹⁵⁵ The supposedly Chicano/a writer turned out to be an Anglo-American old man called Daniel Lewis James, provoking outrage among the Chicano/a community.¹⁵⁶ But this led to a discussion about whether this novel could be considered a Chicano/a novel despite having an Anglo-American author, resurrecting a debate on Chicano/a authenticity and the canon.

The barrio with its working-class Latino/a population tends to be the setting of many Chicano/a novels. According to the authors of *Chicano Ethnicity*, barrios 'are symbolic of the differentness [sic] of the Mexican people, and apparently they also serve as a refuge for those Chicanos who strongly identify with their ethnic heritage.' (p. 8) But, this association between Chicanos/as and the *barrio* also ensures that

¹⁵² Sandra Cisneros, ' "We're Still Invisible". An Interview with Jean Renoir', *Crossroads*, (May 1993), p. 12.

¹⁵³ Native American literature has been subjected to similar discussions around the concept of true Native American identity. Susan Meisenholder treats this theme in an article where she exposes the criticism that Louise Erdrich's novel *The Beet Queen* underwent for its lack of ' "no overt racism, no jagged sense of lost Indian culture or identity"'. See 'Race and Gender in Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*', *ARIEL*, 25:1 (1994), 45-57, (p. 56).

¹⁵⁴ Danny Santiago, *Famous All Over Town* (New York: Plume, 1984)

¹⁵⁵ Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition*, p. 28. Refer to this author for a larger discussion of this controversial book.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 28.

works are expected to be set in such an environment.¹⁵⁷ This is the argument of the authors of *Stages of Life*, who, in the context of Latino/a theatre, argue that plays are expected to 'have the barrio community and its working-class, disenfranchised denizens as a referent and as a proof of "authenticity."'¹⁵⁸

During the past years a new voice has emerged that responds to these essentialist concepts of Chicano/a identity and writing by not only refusing to include these *signs* of authenticity but also by mocking them. One of these Chicano/a writers is Richard Rodríguez, who has been condemned for not offering a community-oriented ideology in his writing. In his essay 'An American Writer', Rodríguez makes fun of the figures of the grandmother and the witch, who are expected to be portrayed in a romantic light in Chicano/a literature. He writes:

My grandmother, the oldest relative I knew as a boy, was no sweet old lady. She wouldn't have liked most of you in this room. She was fierce. She didn't live in that enchanted chamber of Latin-American fiction, a room full of butterflies or refracting crystals. And she didn't float over the bed. She knew no secrets of the Mexican *bruja*.¹⁵⁹

Rodríguez refuses to present an idealistic representation of his grandmother just because that is what is expected from a writer of Mexican origins.

Another Chicano/a writer who responds to the pressures to provide a pre-determined writing is Michelle Serros. Her work has been recently published and thus it has not received any critical attention yet. What is particularly admirable is her ability to simultaneously engage in a two-sided project. She manages to lampoon both the mainstream's expectations and stereotypes of Chicanos/as as well as the pedestals of Chicano/a *authenticity*. The titles of her two books, *Chicana Falsa* and *Other Stories of Death, Identity and How to Be A Chicana Role Model* predict texts that will take an ironic approach towards ethnic identity issues. Seemingly based on

¹⁵⁷ Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* - discussed in chapter three - can be read as a response to the idealization of the *barrio* by many Chicano writers.

¹⁵⁸ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporita Sternbach, *Stages of Life. Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 35.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Rodríguez, 'An American writer', in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. by Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 3-13 (p. 10).

Serros' own life, the protagonist of both her books strives to be a writer in an environment imbued in racism and essentialist notions of ethnicity. Not identifying with the surrounding notions of Chicano/a identity and the images of Chicanos/as provided by both the mainstream *and* the Chicano/a community, Serros welcomes a new identity, *falsedad*. Her books humorously provide an understanding of what the daily experiences of a young Chicana during the 90s are like. In this way, she recounts her sister's failure on the mainstream game show 'The Price Is Right' and the request from an Anglo painter to pose for a painting because she possesses 'an Indian nose'.

In the first poem of the book *Chicana Falsa*, the author exposes the direction of her narrative by explaining what is considered by some individuals to be a 'false Chicano/a.' In high school, a girl tells her:

"You know what you are ?
A Chicana Falsa."
"MEChA don't mean shit,
and that sloppy Spanish of yours
will never get you any discount at Bob's market."
"HOMOGENIZED HISPANIC,
that's what you are."
She
Had once been "Leticia,"
"Tish" for short,
but now weeks into junior high,
She is "La Letty"
Y que
no mas.¹⁶⁰

According to the writer, this poem is based on a junior high incident when 'tough-as-nails' Letty scribbled 'Chicana Falsa' on her locker. Serros expands: 'In her eyes, a true chicana was someone like her - someone who was down with the homeboys, someone who partied and ditched school a lot, a *chola* [female gang member] like her.'¹⁶¹ Thus, Serros criticizes and lampoons the assumption that an

¹⁶⁰ Michelle Serros, 'La Letty', *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity and Oxnard* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p.1.

¹⁶¹ 'Interview' by George Rowe in *Contra Costa Newspapers* July 5th 1998,
<http://www.realbooks.com/reviews/0706/chicana.htm>
MEChA stands for El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán.

authentic Chicano/a must have a good level of Spanish and be involved in Chicano/a politics or be part of a gang.

A similar view is expressed in the poem 'Annie Says', where her aunt Annie discourages her from carrying on writing because she has no *genuine* Chicano/a experience:

The Brown Berets,
they're marching.
The whole Chicano movement
passing you by and
you don't even know about that.
You weren't born in no barrio.
No tortilleria down your street.
Bullets never whizzed
past your baby head.

"Chicana without a Cause"¹⁶²

This time, Serros denounces the notion that a bona fide Chicano/a writer must be linked to Chicano/a politics, be from a working-class background and a dangerous milieu, an idea that once again posits the protagonist as 'fake' or not committed enough. Spanish language proficiency is another authenticity marker satirized by Serros.

Eyebrows raise
when I request:
"Hable mas despacio, por favor."
My skin is brown
just like theirs,
But now I'm unworthy of the color
'cause I don't speak Spanish
the way I should.[...]
And then one day,
I'll be a perfected "r" rolling
tilde using Spanish speaker.
A true Mexican at last!¹⁶³

The concept of 'true Mexican-ness' is derided for its obtuse bond to Spanish language competence. Chicano/a middle-class and intellectuals who are believed to possess *authenticity* because of their language skills are also sneered at by Serros. In a passage from *How to be a Chicana Role Model*, a Chicana academic is exposed as

¹⁶² *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* pp. 31-32.

snobbish for criticizing the lack of Spanish mastery of the protagonist, who is working as a waitress at a Chicana conference buffet. In another section, the author makes fun of a woman who has given her daughter an unpronounceable Nahuatl name –Ixotchtiquelta. Whilst the protagonist is signing books, a mother and her daughter request a dedication:

"Her name is Ixotchtiquelta."
 "E-ah ...?"
 "Ixotchtiquelta," she repeats. "You've never heard it? It's a common name in the Nahuatl language."
 "Oh, right." I attempt to write out the name as it sounded.
 "Nooo." The woman looks at my handwriting and frowns. "IX, not EX, and there's only one C. No, not like that. No, Q not G. Oh forget it! Just put down Jenny. That's what her grandparents call her. [...] You don't write or read Nahuatl?"
 "No, not really."
 The mother clicks her tongue and remarks, "That's really a shame."
 "Do you?"
 "I'm starting. I'm taking lessons over at the Learning Annex."¹⁶⁴

Serros derides those middle-class Chicanos/as who perhaps due to their lack of working-class 'authenticating' experience, feel they need to display their language skills and cultural knowledge. Knowledge about a pre-Columbian culture will provide the sufficient *Mexican-ness* in order not to be considered a *vendido*, a sell-out.

In the poem 'Johnwannabechicano', the appropriation of a Chicano/a identity by an Anglo boy is also satirized. As part of his new identity, John Michael Smith is renamed 'Juan Miguel', wears creased beige khakis and eats canned *menudo* for breakfast, but maintains the middle-class privileges of his background:

At the breakfast table
 he slurps canned *menudo*
 ignoring his mother's French toast [...]
 Leaving the house for school
 he doesn't look back
 as his mother calls out.
 Exasperated,
 She finally yells:
 "Juan!
 "Juan Miguel,
 you forgot your lunch!"
 But he ignores that too.
 He's been humiliated
 one too many times
 in front of his homeboys
 by her chicken salad, Ambrosia Surprise

¹⁶⁴ Michelle Serros, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), p. 201.

tucked into lime green Tupperware.
 Besides,
 today the guys are taking him to "the coach"
 for tacos de sesos,
 whatever that is.¹⁶⁵

In this poem, Serros addresses what Rodríguez calls 'the chic of ethnicity'¹⁶⁶ and the assumption that Chicano/a ethnicity can be easily appropriated by simply adopting a Spanish sounding name or certain attitude.

What is particularly admirable about Serros' work is its resistance to hold the mainstream solely responsible for promoting essentialist definitions of ethnic identity. The pressure to follow a set of characteristics in order to be *authentically ethnic* is also endorsed by the Chicano/a community itself. Members of her family and community believe the protagonist is not suitable to be called Chicana or represent the whole group as she has not had the relevant experiences.

By positioning herself as a *fake* but also as a role model, Serros draws attention to the lack of cultural figures based on anything other than standards of authenticity. In an interview, Serros argues that she has had no choice but to accept this status: 'So "role model" isn't a position I applied for, but I think there are so few Latina/Chicana poets around, I've been put in that position. And I want to be responsible, because I think a lot of role models we have – sports figures, celebrities – just aren't cutting it.'¹⁶⁷ These ideas suggest that young Chicanos/as find it difficult to relate to the role models provided by both the mainstream and Chicano/a culture. Serros questions the extent to which the figures upheld as *true* Chicanos/as, such as the *chola* or the Brown Beret militant are viable role models for young generations. By positioning a non-Spanish speaking Chicana as a realistic role model for Chicanos/as, the author suggests that previous notions of Chicanidad have become obsolete in contemporary times. Thus, Serros addresses the important subject of

¹⁶⁵ *Chicana Falsa*, pp. 33-4.

¹⁶⁶ Rodríguez, 'An American Writer', p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ 'Interview', no page number.

Mexican/Chicano role models within Chicana literature. Not only have traditional figures become unrealistic models for young Chicanas, but so have the more contemporary icons like *cholas*.

By embracing a 'false' identity, Serros rids it of its negative connotations and reflects a willingness to welcome a cultural identity not moulded by essentialist ideas based on language skills or political ideology. Her two books suggest that her experiences as a Chicana are as valid as those of a *chola* or a Chicano-movement activist. By challenging the cultural authenticity inherent in the reenactment of pre-established behaviors and attitudes, Serros reinforces Werner Sollors argument that ethnicity 'is not a thing but a process - and it [does not require] a settling on a fixed encyclopedia of supposed cultural essentials.'¹⁶⁸

Sandra Cisneros also explores notions of authenticity in her short story '*Bien Pretty*'. Language competence is articulated as an indicator of Mexican genuineness when the protagonist describes her Mexican lover: 'When Flavio accidentally hammered his thumb, he never yelled "Ouch!" he said "¡ Ay!"' The true test of a native Spanish speaker.' (p. 153) The Chicana author Mary Helen Ponce also addresses how the Spanish language is regarded as a sign of authenticity within the Chicano/a literary field. In an interview, Ponce criticizes how Chicano/a writers are expected to include Spanish in their work: '[...] I don't believe in sticking Spanish into my stories just because it is fashionable for Chicana writers or in order to show people that I know some Spanish [...].'¹⁶⁹ These comments reflect that some Chicano/a writers show uneasiness at the fact that they feel pressurized to display their ethnicity in obvious ways.

Even though Spanish competence may guarantee authenticity within the Chicano/a community, it does not in Mexico. This is the argument proposed by Pat

¹⁶⁸ Werner Sollors, 'Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity', in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, p. xv.

¹⁶⁹ Ponce, 'Interview', in *Chicana Ways*, ed. by Ikaas, pp.175-203, (p. 189).

Mora in her poem 'Legal Alien' where she reveals how Chicanos are seen as 'aliens' and inauthentic by both Anglos and Mexicans:

Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural [...]
 able to order in fluent Spanish
 at a Mexican restaurant,
 American but hyphenated,
 viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
 perhaps inferior, definitely different,
 viewed by Mexicans as alien,
 (their eyes say, "You may speak
 Spanish but you're not like me")
 an American to Mexicans
 a Mexican to Americans [...].¹⁷⁰

Mora's poem expresses the frustrations that arise from not being accepted either by Mexico or the U.S. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican artist living in the U.S., also offers some observations on this subject as he criticizes the ways in which he is refused entry into both the Mexican and Chicano/a communities:

My Mexican brothers have managed to turn me into the other, along with the 25 million Mexicans spread throughout the United States.
 Paradoxically, some Chicanos still have a hard time considering me a "Chicano," either because I wasn't born in Aztlán, I didn't participate in the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, or I still have an accent that gives away my *chilango* [...] upbringing. [...] I have learned to accept the advantages and disadvantages of being a "border citizen," which means I am always the other, but I get to choose my identity.¹⁷¹

Gómez-Peña maintains that his definition of Chicanidad is as acceptable as any. Like Serros, he chooses to define his identity in his own terms, preferring to represent a multiplicity of voices which obliterates any concept of authenticity.

The Chicano cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz maintains a similar line of thought by calling for an annihilation of paradigms of authenticity. Besides publishing satirical cartoons, he maintains a website called www.pochocomm.com. From a humorous point of view, this website, via cartoons, regularly deals with current news, giving emphasis to issues concerning Latinos/as. The website invites Chicanos/as to welcome the identity of *pochos*, a derogatory term that means neither Mexican or American. The editors explain that they

¹⁷⁰ Pat Mora, 'Legal Alien', in *Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras*, p. 376.

¹⁷¹ Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika*, p. 21.

have forcefully turned pocho into a term of pride, a rallying cry for the tacky, uncultured Mexican-American and Chicano, whose lack of proper Spanish skills, and somewhat weakened ability to eat some hot spicy food items makes him a pariah, an outcast both in the US and in Mexico. [...] the pocho and pocha [...] are actually superior beings, able to straddle two worlds while enjoying the benefits of being bi-lingual, bi-cultural and sometimes bi-ignorant.¹⁷²

Alcaraz encourages Chicanos/as to embrace an identity traditionally branded as inauthentic. Thus, they will be able to be part of two cultures rather than having to choose only one. Alzaraz, as Serros and Gómez-Peña, rejects paradigms of 'genuineness' by accepting their own supposed *in-authenticity* and *falsedad* and turning them into an identity to be proud of. These Chicano/a artists call for an anti-essentialist approach to Chicano/a identity and a better understanding of the experiences of young generations. These three artists are part of a new movement that manifests the right to articulate ethnic identity in one's own terms, without submitting to clichéd or obsolete canons of Chicanidad. The assumption that Chicano/a identity lies in a political and class specification contradicts Michael Fischer's notion of ethnicity as 'reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual [...].'¹⁷³ These works reflect that the concept of a Chicano/a identity decreed by the movement's discourse differs from that of Cisneros' and Serros' generation.

This chapter has concentrated on mapping the field of Chicano/a writing by identifying its main socio-political and cultural directions. It has demonstrated how the ideology sustained during the Chicano movement had a great impact on the literature produced at the time and afterwards. Disagreeing with the masculinist and nationalist vision of Mexican/Chicano history and mythology during the early period, writers of the 1980s and 1990s re-wrote key symbols and themes from different perspectives. But, despite the intention to move away from essentialist

¹⁷² <http://www.pochos.com>

¹⁷³ Michael Fischer, quoted in Sollors, p. xi.

representations of history, some women writers idealized certain aspects of a female *indigenism*.

More individualistic voices that tackled issues related with gender, class and sexuality have emerged during the last two decades. But, despite the waning of nationalism and the freedom to speak from an 'I' perspective, writers have felt the pressure to include certain elements or themes in their writing that would position them as 'authentic'. The concept of a 'Chicano/a canon' was created and decreed that only works emphasizing issues such as ethnicity or community should be permitted entry. I have intended to widen this debate by reviewing the critical material written on this subject and by discussing the work of writers who directly respond to these pressures.

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed the emergence of more subjective voices that reject an essentialist approach on Chicano/a identity. The writers discussed during the remainder of the thesis, such as Rechy and Cisneros, reflect this attitude as they revise their culture from subjective perspectives. Nevertheless, some artists and writers are still accused of betraying the community when they reconfigure traditional icons and forms. This problem will be revisited in the following chapter, which analyses how Catholic icons and forms are revamped.

Chapter 2: Revitalizing Catholicism in Chicana Writing and Art

'I'm very, very much devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but not exactly the same figure celebrated in Church.'¹

From the reading of Chicano/a writing, one can deduce that Catholicism forms an important part of Chicanos/as' cultural legacy. Religious themes and symbols abound in Chicano/a literature but, like the nationalist theme, it also represents a problematic issue. As explained previously, Chicana writers and artists disagreed about the manner in which male leaders interpreted the nationalist and indigenist discourse. Instead of rejecting this aspect of their identity, Chicanas undertook the task of re-orientating Mexican history and mythology towards a female perspective. A similar approach is assumed when dealing with the religious patrimony. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Chicana writers understand the role that the Catholic Church plays in the oppression of women and reflect an ambiguous attitude towards Catholicism. Instead of rejecting this aspect of their culture, Chicanas remould Catholic icons and practices allowing them to be embraced. As a central figure of Mexican Catholicism and a role model for Chicanas, it is no surprise that the Virgin of Guadalupe undergoes a major deconstruction and reconstruction in Chicana writing and art. For this reason, a considerable part of this chapter is dedicated to the historical background and literary and artistic reconstructions of this figure.

Although my main intention is to concentrate on the literary re-articulations of Catholicism, I feel it necessary to include in my discussion Chicana visual representations that reflect a similar approach. Both areas express a call to intersect the religious narrative with political, social and gender issues.

¹ Sandra Cisneros, 'Interview with Reed Way Dasenbrock', in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, pp. 287-306 (p. 292).

Latino Catholicism

Before discussing the literary and artistic reconstructions of Catholic symbols and practices, we must clarify the ways in which Catholicism is manifested and understood by the Chicano/a population. To this end, I will review the research of critics that have studied Catholicism within the Latino/a population as a whole, rather than solely the Chicano/a population.

Firstly, it should be noted that Latino/a Catholicism differs from Euro-American Catholicism. Gloria Anzaldúa testifies to that: 'My family, like most Chicanos, do not practice Roman Catholicism but a folk Catholicism with many pagan elements.'² As Anthony Stevens-Arroyo makes clear, this characteristic is not only rooted in the colonization of Latin America but also in the Latinos/as' history of migration which differs from that of Euro-Americans. Stevens-Arroyo explains:

Although Latinos were peoples conquered in war, the Church undermined this awareness. At times unwittingly and at others deliberately, Catholicism told Latinos that they should imitate an immigrant's attitude for opportunity in a new home rather than nurture resentment against an invading U.S. imperialism.³

According to Stevens-Arroyo, the notion that 'the longer a Catholic resides in the U.S., the more the Church helps him/her become "Americanized" and to enter into the economic "middle-class"'⁴ has drawn Latinos/as away from institutional Catholicism. The official Church also ignores the specific historical and cultural background of the Latino/a population. Arising from the crossing of European and indigenous cultures, many Chicanos/as identify with a spirituality that incorporates combined religious practices such as, according to Lara Medina, 'retaining the *santos* revered by our *abuelos*, renewing hidden relationships with indigenous goddesses

² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 27.

³ Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, 'Latino Catholicism and the Eye of the Beholder: Notes Towards a New Sociological Paradigm', *Latino Studies Journal*, 6:2 (1995), 22-55 (p. 25).

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

[...], lighting candles as well as sage or copal, meditating, chanting or making prayer [...].⁵

Another significant characteristic of Latino/a Catholicism is that it tends to be very much home-centred, 'assuming a primacy over clerically dominated and institutionally-based traditions like mass attendance and obedience to the clergy.'⁶ The home-based aspect of religious practices enables the devotee not only to exercise those customs unrecognised by the Church but also to incorporate personal issues affecting the devotee. This facet of Catholicism is best exemplified in the tradition of home altar, a space that allows the expression of an individualised spirituality. This will be discussed in more detail later on in the chapter.

The practice of Catholicism can also affirm Latino/a identity, thus 'distinguishing Latin America from a Protestant United States.'⁷ It also facilitates the use of Spanish language as argued by Stevens-Arroyo: '[...] because Catholicism is generally more supportive than civil society of the Spanish language and Latino cultural differences, religion is an important instrument of Latino cultural affirmation.'⁸

The idiosyncrasies of Latino/a Catholicism have led Jeanette Rodríguez and Orlando O. Espín to refer to these practices as popular religiosity or popular Catholicism, 'reread[ing] official Catholicism [...] and thereby produc[ing] the people's own version of the religion.'⁹ Rodríguez protests that popular religiosity is

⁵ Medina, 'Los Espíritus Siguen Hablando: Chicana Spiritualities', in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), pp. 189-213, (p. 210). Sandra Cisneros makes a similar comment and describes Mexican Catholicism as 'European Catholicism and Precolumbian religion all mixed in. It's a very strange Catholicism like nowhere else on the planet [...]' (p. 67) In Pilar E. Rodríguez Aranda, 'On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros'.

⁶ Stevens-Arroyo, 'Latino Catholicism', p. 31.

⁷ Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, 'The Emergence of a Social Identity among Latino Catholics: An Appraisal', in *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the United States. Issues and Concerns*, ed. by Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J. (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 77-130 (p. 86).

⁸ Stevens-Arroyo, 'Latino Catholicism', p. 35.

⁹ Orlando O. Espín, 'Popular Catholicism among Latinos', in *Hispanic Catholic Culture Hispanic Catholic Culture in the United States*, ed. by Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., pp. 308-59 (p. 310).

undermined by not being considered as 'equally Catholic' as the institutional church but

as primitive and backward. But [...] it continues to exist because for the poor and marginalized it is a source of power, dignity, and acceptance not found in the institutional church. Popular religiosity is not celebrated by a few, but by the majority of the people. It is an expression of faith which has survived over a considerable period with roots in the historical beginnings of Hispanic culture.¹⁰

As with other aspects of Chicanos/as' and Latinos/as' cultural legacy, religion becomes a tool to resist assimilation and to affirm their identity. In the United States, Latino/a Catholicism becomes the means to assert the specific linguistic and cultural traits of Latinos/as.

The Virgin of Guadalupe

The central symbol of Mexican Catholicism is the Virgin of Guadalupe, a figure that cannot be simply described as the Mexican Virgin Mary. A significant aspect of this figure stems from the way in which it has been re-interpreted by different generations across centuries. This Marian symbol represents Mexican identity but also female passivity and submission. For this reason, Chicanas, unable to identify with her, reconfigure her, investing her with a more empowering significance. Before discussing the significance of this icon amongst Chicanas, we must first look at her role in the creation of a Mexican national identity.

Octavio Paz puts in no uncertain terms the relevance of Guadalupe in Mexico: 'No es un secreto para nadie que el catolicismo mexicano se concentra en el culto a la Virgen de Guadalupe.'¹¹ Although she embodies idealized womanhood, she also stands for the syncretism of the Indian and Spanish cultures. In the words of Octavio Paz in his foreword to Jacques Lafaye's *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe*, this icon was 'a natural and supernatural mother, composed of American earth and European

¹⁰ Jeanette Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe. Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 144.

¹¹ Paz, 'Los hijos de la Malinche', in *El laberinto de la soledad*, pp. 202-27 (p. 222).

'It is not a secret that Mexican Catholicism is focused on the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe.'

theology.¹² According to Stafford Poole, most accounts of the legend of her apparition are based on the 1649 Nahuatl writings of the priest Luis Laso de la Vega, *Huey tlamahuiçoltica*.¹³ The story of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe goes as follows: In December 1531 (twelve years after the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico), the Virgin appeared on the hill of Tepeyac to the native Juan Diego, who was on his way to receive religious instruction. The Virgin required the construction of a temple on that site for "There will hear their [the people] weeping and their sorrows in order to remedy and heal all their various afflictions, their sufferings, and their sorrows."¹⁴ Juan Diego went to see the bishop Juan de Zumárraga, who not believing the native's story, demanded some sort of evidence. But the following day, Juan Diego could not return to Tepeyac as his uncle was ill. On his way to fetch a priest for his uncle, he avoided the hill of Tepeyac in order to avoid the Virgin. She nevertheless appeared to him and reassured him that his uncle was not going to die and that he had to pick some flowers on the hill. As indicated by the Virgin, he placed these flowers in his cloak and went to see the bishop. In his presence, he unfolded his cloak which had the image of the Virgin miraculously imprinted on it. As a result of this miracle, the bishop Zumárraga ordered the construction of a chapel at Tepeyac.¹⁵

It must be pointed out that even though the apparition is meant to take place in the year 1531, the first publication of the story did not appear until 1648. Stafford Poole believes that the 'story of the apparitions was unknown to the Spaniards and criollos of Mexico City in 1648.' (p. 106) Poole maintains that it was Miguel

¹² Octavio Paz, 'Foreword. The Flight of Quetzalcóatl and the Quest for Legitimacy', in Jacques Lafaye *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe. The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness 1531-1813* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. ix-xxii (p. xix).

¹³ See Poole's writings for a detailed investigation of the different sources and versions of the legend. Stafford Poole, *The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997)

¹⁴ Quoted in Poole, p. 27.

¹⁵ The 1st August 2002, Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego, thus being the first indigenous saint.

Sánchez and Luis Laso de la Vega who first published these accounts.¹⁶ According to Poole, Sánchez published in 1648 an account entitled *Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe, Milagrosamente aparecida en la ciudad de Mexico*. Poole argues that this work is responsible for 'bonding [the story] to criollo identity' (p. 100); a laudatory letter by Francisco de Siles refers to the icon as "our criolla sovereign" (p. 104) and 'commended Sánchez for writing a book "for those born in this land"' (p. 105). These observations lead Poole to claim that 'the fusion of Guadalupe and Mexican identity began not at Tepeyac in 1531 but in Mexico City in 1648.' (pp. 100-01)

By appearing on the hill of Tepeyac, where the indigenous deity Tonantzin was venerated, the Virgin of Guadalupe is interpreted as the Christian counterpart of this goddess. The act of substituting a native icon with a Christian one is described by Tzevetan Todorov as 'religious conquest' which resides in 'removing from a holy place certain images and establishing others there instead, preserving – and this is essential – the cult sites in which the same aromatic herbs are burned.'¹⁷ Serge Gruzinski argues that this is the way in which Tonantzin and the Virgin of Guadalupe became associated: 'Empecinados en sustituir por doquier el paganismo por el cristianismo, algunos franciscanos habían levantado ahí una capilla consagrada a la Virgen.'¹⁸ In this way, both natives and Spaniards venerate this image:

Los indios habían conservado el hábito de dirigirse al Tepeyac. Los españoles fueron atraídos por la imagen nueva que mandó colocar [arzobispo] Montúfar [in 1555], por los milagros que operaba y, para apropiarse mejor de esa devoción, dieron a la Virgen el nombre de Guadalupe.

¹⁶ According to David Brading, the fact that the story became known many years after the supposed apparition led to suspicions: 'Alarm in clerical circles deepened when it became known that Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Mexico's most respected historian, had concluded that the apparition narrative had been first recorded by Sánchez 116 years after the event, and that the universal silence of sixteenth-century chroniclers about the miracle meant that the tradition had no historical credibility.' (p. 10) In *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

¹⁷ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, p. 60.

¹⁸ Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón a "Blade Runner" (1492-2019)* 2nd edn (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), p. 104.

'Since they were obsessed with substituting paganism by Christianity, some Franciscans built a chapel in honour to the Virgin.'

A su vez, las multitudes indias siguieron el ejemplo de los europeos y adoptaron la apelación española, sin dejar empero de darle el nombre de Tonantzin.¹⁹

More elements intervened in the articulation of Guadalupe as a symbol of syncretism and of Mexican identity.²⁰ The rivalry between the Virgin of Remedios (La Conquistadora or Gachupina) and the Virgin of Guadalupe led to the accentuation of Guadalupe's Mexican traits. As Margarita Zires explains, the Virgin of Remedios originated from Spain, looked like a white woman, dressed in an ornate way, and had a child. In contrast, the Virgin of Guadalupe was dark skinned, she did not have a child, and looked humble.²¹ According to Poole, Guadalupe was employed for the first time as a national symbol during Miguel Hidalgo's revolution of 1810 and it was only after independence was gained that she emerged as a 'símbolo político con cierta autonomía.'²² According to Zires, thus Guadalupe 'se vuelve más indígena, más mestiza, más criolla, o sea más mexicana. [...] Se vuelve más milagrosa.'²³ (p. 299)

The Virgin of Guadalupe's connection with the pre-Columbian deity Tonantzin was affirmed by certain elements, including, Tonantzin also being called 'Our

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 105-06.

'The Indians had kept the custom of going to Tepeyac. The Spaniards were attracted by the new image that had been placed under the command of the [archbishop] Montufar [in 1555] and by the miracles that she did. In order to appropriate this devotion, they named the Virgin Guadalupe. Simultaneously, the crowds of Indians followed the example of the Europeans and adopted the Spanish name, without ceasing to call her Tonantzin.'

²⁰ We must mention the existence of another Virgin of Guadalupe that belongs to the Spanish region of Extremadura, where Cortés originated. How the Mexican icon ended up with the same name as the one from Extremadura is uncertain. In *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe*, Jacques Lafaye attempts to give an explanation for this matter. Quoting Father Vargas Ugarte, Lafaye suggests that; 'the name was given by a kind of association of ideas' since the Extremaduran Virgin represented 'Hispanic Christianity in its struggle against the Moslems and, by process of association, in the wars against the pagans of the New World.' (p. 231)

²¹ Margarita Zires, 'Los mitos de la Virgen de Guadalupe. Su proceso de construcción y reinterpretación en el México pasado y contemporáneo', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 10.2 (1994), 281-313 (p. 298).

Jacques Lafaye also examines the syncretism of Tonantzin and Guadalupe. Lafaye discusses how the merger of these two icons made the clergy suspicious. Quoting the Franciscan Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, he states: 'The Indians today, as in the old days, come from afar to visit this Tonantzin, and to me this cult seems very suspect, for there are everywhere numerous churches consecrated to Our Lady, but they do not go there, preferring to come afar to this Tonantzin, as in the past.' (p. 216)

²² Ibid. p. 299.

'political symbol with some autonomy'

²³ 'becomes more indigenous, more mestiza, more Creole, that is more Mexican. [...] She becomes more miraculous.'

Mother', something that 'convenía perfectamente a la Virgen cristiana'²⁴, and the fact that both icons were connected with the symbol of the moon. With the passing of time, Guadalupe's association with this native goddess has been forgotten, even though, according to Ena Campbell, 'in some parts of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe is still addressed by her Indian name.' (p. 11) As I will explain later on, this is changing, since Chicanas have begun to unmask Guadalupe and acknowledge the indigenous deities from which she is descended.

By being associated with an indigenous deity, Guadalupe not only represents a link with the past but also a sense of regeneration. Octavio Paz argues that Guadalupe acted as symbolic mother for the orphan native people:

Tonantzin-Guadalupe was the imaginary compensation of the Indians for the state of orphanage to which the Conquest had reduced them. The Indians, who had seen the massacre of their priests and the destruction of their idols, whose ties with their past and their supernatural world had been severed, took refuge in the lap of Tonantzin-Guadalupe, [...]. For the Creoles, the brown Virgin represented the possibility of striking roots in the soil of Anahuac. She was both womb and grave: to strike root is to bury oneself in the earth.²⁵

Even though Guadalupe embodies the syncretism of two cultures (or imposition of one culture over the other) and a sense of hope, José Limón invests her with a more redemptive significance. Following Octavio Paz who argues that Guadalupe is set in opposition to the treacherous figure of La Malinche, this critic claims that the Virgin permitted Mexicans 'to regain both social status and moral certainty after the degradation of the Conquest symbolically expressed through Doña Marina's "betrayal"'.²⁶ Arising from the clash of two cultures, this icon is capable of

²⁴ 'suited perfectly the Christian Virgin', Gruzinski, p. 105. Alan Sandstrom mentions that her Nahuatl name can be translated as 'our sacred mother' (p. 26) and that she represents 'the complex processes of fertility.' (p. 40). Alan R. Sandstrom, 'The Tonantsi Cult of the Eastern Nahuatl' in *Mother Worship. Theme and Variations*, ed. by James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 25-50.

²⁵ Paz, in *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe*, p. xix.

²⁶ José E. Limón, 'La Llorona, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious', in *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History*, ed. by Adelaida R. Del Castillo (Encino: Floricanto Press, 1990), pp. 399-432 (p. 403).

A similar point is made by Charles Ramírez Berg in *Cinema of Solitude. A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 8.

representing diverse beliefs. Poole argues that *guadalupismo* carried out different functions:

For the Spaniards it was a way of assuaging the guilty consciences of the conquistadores and their descendants. For the Indians it was the means of giving up the past and becoming reconciled to the present. For the criollos it became the banner of independence. For the modern Mexicans the message of blessing, divine love, and special election is a comfort against the superiority of their northern neighbor. (p. 6)

As Lafaye claims, the Virgin of Guadalupe plays a key role in the development of a sense of Mexican identity, *la mexicanidad*. Being 'the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano',²⁷ Guadalupe reaches to all class, gender and political strata. Consequently, these groups feel validated to use the Catholic icon to legitimise their enterprise. In this way, Emiliano Zapata and Miguel Hidalgo made use of this icon to unite and lead the people towards liberation. Similarly, after the independence, as Gruzinski argues, 'la clase política mexicana se apoderó de la imagen del Tepeyac; tanto liberales como conservadores se mostraron igualmente deseosos de controlar lo que en adelante se había convertido en el símbolo de la nación [...]'.²⁸ (p. 206)

On the other side of the border, her image continues to unite the Mexican people and to inspire resistance. During the 1965 grape strike in Delano, California, Guadalupe's image was used to bring together Chicanos/as farmworkers. César Chávez, the leader of the United Farm Workers, recognized in the icon of Guadalupe a capacity to motivate Chicanos/as to rebellion.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, during the Chicano movement the religious icon was employed to connote ethnic pride and 'constituted a symbol of indigenist resistance to spiritual colonization, transmuted by the goals of la

²⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 30.

²⁸ 'the Mexican political class appropriated the image of Tepeyac; liberals and conservatives were willing to control what had turned into a symbol of the nation [...].'

²⁹ Winthrop Yinger observed that the Virgin of Guadalupe is 'present at nearly every farm worker meeting and is carried in every procession or march'. See César Chávez: *The Rhetoric of Nonviolence* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975), p. 32. Suzanne Oboler also states that Chávez used the 'triple

Causa into a symbol of Chicano/a resistance to assimilation and territorial conquest.³⁰

Even though Guadalupe is employed as a symbol of contestation, she remains a Marian symbol. Feminist scholars such as Marina Warner warn that, despite the compassionate aspect of the Virgin Mary, she is an 'icon of feminine perfection, built on the equivalence between goodness, motherhood, purity, gentleness, and submission'³¹, a far too inaccessible model to follow.³² Despite the political and cultural significance of the Mexican Virgin, she has also been used to 'make [Mexican women] docile and enduring.'³³ It is generally agreed that Mexican women are subjected to three female role models.³⁴ One should aspire to be like the Virgin of Guadalupe, pure and submissive, but avoid following the path of La Malinche, the woman who betrayed her race for a foreign man. The third is La Llorona, the weeping woman, a mythical figure who drowned her children and thus was destined to live in limbo, crying and searching for her dead offspring.³⁵ Belonging to the cultural heritage and representing an idealized model of womanhood, it is not surprising that, as Gaspar de Alba claims, Guadalupe is 'a problematic image for contemporary Chicana feminists.' (p. 47) For this reason, in the past years, both Chicana writers and artists have revised this important Mexican female icon. According to Elena Poniatowska, 'For Chicanas, the Virgin of Guadalupe is an

³⁰ Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art. Inside/Outside the Master's House*, p. 47.

³¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 335.

³² The extent to which the Virgin Mary is posited as a role model for women is exemplified in the story 'My *Tocaya*' by Sandra Cisneros. The young protagonist narrates that in her Catholic school, pupils were subjected to discussions on subjects such as 'The Blessed Virgin Mary: Role Model for Today's Young Woman' (p. 38). In *Woman Hollering Creek*, pp. 36-40.

³³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 31.

³⁴ For more information on this subject see, José Limón, 'La Llorona, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious'; Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*; Rita Cano Alcalá, 'Virgins, Martyrs and Whores: Mexican Cultural Icons of Womanhood in Chicana Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1997)

³⁵ I will discuss La Llorona in more detail in the third chapter where I deal with folk tales involving this figure.

obsession [...].³⁶ This effort has to be understood as part of a revisionist enterprise whose goal is to re-signify the cultural patrimony that pigeonholes women as virgins or whores. This revisionist tendency must also be seen as part of Chicanos/as' endeavour to question and re-articulate those aspects of their heritage which construct Chicano/a identity under essentialist terms. As we saw in the first chapter, the fact that Chicana writers disagree with the masculinist articulation of some nationalist symbols does not impede them appropriating them and re-signifying them. A similar attitude is adopted with regards to the icon of Guadalupe. Rather than creating a new feminist figure that will relate to their subjectivity, Chicanas re-articulate a recognizable symbol, familiar to all Chicanos/as.

The Virgin of Guadalupe in Chicano/a literature

'My *Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the Mother of God. She is God.'³⁷

Even though many Chicana writers express their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, they nevertheless maintain a problematic relation with Catholicism. Gloria Anzaldúa writes '[...] the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts [...]. It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.'³⁸ Sandra Cisneros also discusses the pressures that Catholicism exerts on Mexican women: '[...] there's so much guilt. It's so hard being Catholic, and even though you don't call yourself Catholic anymore, you have vestiges of that guilt inside you.'³⁹ These views suggest that Chicanas' critical attitude towards Catholicism doesn't hinder them from embracing the Virgin of Guadalupe as an empowering role model and interpret her as something more than a submissive figure.

³⁶ Poniatowska, 'Mexicanas and Chicanas', p. 48.

³⁷ Sandra Cisneros, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', in *Goddess of the Americas. Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, ed. by Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), pp. 46-51 (p. 50).

³⁸ *Borderlands*, p. 37.

³⁹ Aranda, p. 67.

Critics from various disciplines have also joined this revisionist effort. José Limón for instance concedes that she 'does represent idealized and possibly repressive standards of purity, [but] she also has functioned as a symbol of popular resistance for Mexicans in general [...]' (p. 405) Using a sociological methodology, Jeanette Rodríguez investigates the significance of this icon amongst second-generation Mexican-American women with the aim of challenging the assumption that 'Guadalupe is the model of submissive, passive Mexican womanhood.' (p. 160) After having interviewed a number of Mexican-American women, Rodríguez argues that these women venerate the Virgin of Guadalupe because she 'stands among them to reflect who they are – mother, woman, *morena*, mestiza – and gives them a place in a world that negates them.' (p. 145) In this way, Rodríguez draws attention to the racial difference that Guadalupe represents within the United States. In a society in which Chicanos/as are ignored and undermined, Guadalupe stands as an empowering symbol of Mexican identity and of ethnic pride.

In their revisionist enterprise, Chicana writers also place emphasis on the racial aspect of Guadalupe. This has led them to explore the historical background from which she arose and highlight her indigenous background. Having researched her origins, Chicanas recover the indigenous deities from which she is descended.⁴⁰ Thus, the acknowledgement of the pre-Columbian goddesses from which Guadalupe originates overturns the one-dimensional aspect of her as a passive Catholic figure. This approach is epitomized in the short story 'Little Miracles, Kept Promises' from Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. Cisneros presents a series of texts that accompany the *milagros* or *exvotos*, objects such as hair or flowers that have been offered to a Virgin or saint in return or gratitude for a granted miracle or favour. Written by different devotees of Mexican origin, these fictional

⁴⁰See also Jacqueline Doyle's article, which examines the contemporary re-significations of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Chicana literature. 'Assumptions of the Virgin and Recent Chicana Writing', *Women's Studies*, 26 (1997), 171-201.

texts reflect the anxieties of the Mexican-American population of Texas. Devotees for instance ask a Virgin or saint to intervene in order to be finally given a delayed salary or to help a family member to stop taking drugs. But the most interesting requests arise from the women. One of the petitions is written by a woman called Rosario de Leon, who addressing the Virgin of Guadalupe, explains why she had refused to venerate her in the past:

Virgencita de Guadalupe. For a long time I wouldn't let you in my house. I couldn't see you without seeing my ma each time my father came home drunk and yelling, blaming everything that ever went wrong in his life on her.

[...] Couldn't look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God. Couldn't let you in my house.

[...] All that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering. Hell no, Not here. Not me.

I don't know how it all fell in place. How I finally understood who you are. No longer Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzin. Your church at Tepeyac built on the site of her temple. Sacred ground no matter whose goddess claims it.

That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during civil war, and during a farmworkers' strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother's patience, strength in my grandmother's endurance. [...]

When I learned your real name is Coatloxopeuh, She Who Has Dominion over Serpents, when I recognized you as Tonantzin, and learned your names are Teteoinnan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Tlazolteotl, Coatlicue, Chalchiuhtlicue, Coyolxauhqui, Huixtocihuatl, Chicomecoatl, Cihuacoatl, when I could see you as Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, [...] I wasn't ashamed, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, my ancestors' child.⁴¹

The devotee explains that she had rejected her because she believed this Catholic figure has played a key role in the oppression of her female family members. But once she recognizes Guadalupe's function in the uprising of Mexican people against the authorities and her connection with indigenous goddesses, she is able to see her in a new light and thus accept her. The female believer is empowered by comprehending that Guadalupe emerges from a memorable past. Rosario understands that past generations have tended to focus on the submissive aspect of

⁴¹ Sandra Cisneros, 'Little Miracles, Kept Promises', in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, pp. 117-29 (pp. 127-28).

As Cisneros implies in this passage, the goddess Tonantzin is also known under other names. Burr Cartwright Brundage explains: 'We may group a constellation of the many names applied to the goddess around that of Tonantzin, literally Our Holy Mother. Cihuatzin, Revered Lady; Toci, Our Grandmother; Ilama, Old Woman; Tocenán, All Mother; and Teteoinnan, Mother of Gods-all speak to the same effect.' (p. 154) *The Fifth Sun. Aztec Gods, Aztec World*, (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979)

Jacques Lafaye maintains that Tonantzin was also identified with Cihuacoatl, a deity linked with the mythical figure of La Llorona, as I will explain in the third chapter.

Guadalupe's identity and that there are other significant facets that counteract those characteristics.

The acceptance of Guadalupe is sometimes preceded by a refusal to acknowledge her as a positive icon. Agnostic Guillermo Gómez-Peña confesses that he had always been distrustful of the ways in which she had been used in Mexico: '[...] in her name, many people in Mexico have been forced into social submission, political passivity and fear [...].'⁴² In 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', Cisneros states that she had always rejected this religious figure because she was an impractical role model for Mexican women: 'She was so damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus?'⁴³

As Stafford Poole argues in his work, Guadalupe is 'an ambiguous symbol [since] she represents both liberation and submission.' (p. 6) Believing the submissive aspect of Guadalupe has been stressed excessively, Chicanas focus on other facets of her identity that posit her as an empowering symbol. This is achieved by drawing attention to the pre-Columbian history of Guadalupe. In her semi-biographical, semi-historical account, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa states:

Speaking Nahuatl, she told Juan Diego [...] that her name was *María Coatlicueh*. *Coatl* is the Nahuatl word for serpent. *Lopeuh* means "the one who has dominion over serpents." I interpret this as "the one who is at one with the beasts." [...] Some say it means "she who crushed or stepped the serpent," with the serpent as the symbol of the indigenous religion, meaning that her religion was to take the place of the Aztec religion. (pp. 28-29)

As in Cisneros's story 'Little Miracles, Kept Promises', Tonantzin is not the only deity reclaimed by Chicana writers. Revealing that Toci, 'patroness of weaving, spinning, and curing'⁴⁴ and Xochiquetzal, the goddess of love - identified with the

⁴² Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'The Two Guadalupes', in *Goddess of the America*, ed. by Castillo, pp. 178-83 (p. 178).

⁴³ Cisneros, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', p. 48.

⁴⁴ Cartwright, *The Fifth Sun*, p. 155.

Mother Earth⁴⁵ - are aspects of Guadalupe's identity, enables the devotee to interpret Guadalupe as a multifaceted deity.

An important attempt at reconstructing the Virgin of Guadalupe is found in the 1996 collection of writings edited by Ana Castillo entitled *Goddess of the Americas*. Different writers (mostly Chicanos/as) give their particular vision of the Virgin, focusing on her religious and socio-political significance. The title of the book, *Goddess of the Americas*, foretells the direction of the writings. First of all, the word 'goddess' implies a willingness to recuperate the pre-Columbian heritage of the icon as well as to eliminate the connotations of chastity implicit in the word 'Virgin'. By stating that she belongs to 'the Americas', it is suggested that Guadalupe pertains to both continents, highlighting her importance among the Chicano/a population.⁴⁶

A common idea that permeates from these writings is the menace that this figure poses for the omnipotent male figure of God. Jeanette Rodriguez entitles her piece 'Guadalupe: The Feminine Face of God'⁴⁷; Cherrie Moraga laments that her mother did not know that 'god was a woman'⁴⁸; and Sandra Cisneros claims:

My *Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the Mother of God. She is God. She is a face for a god without a face, an *indigena* for a god without ethnicity, a female deity for a god who is genderless, but I also understand that for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me.⁴⁹

This approach is reminiscent of the historical studies undertaken by writers such as Merlin Stone who argue that in pre-historical times, God was imagined in female terms. In *When God Was a Woman*, Stone discloses: 'In the beginning, people prayed to the Creatress of Life, the Mistress of Heaven. At the very

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 159.

⁴⁶ The title of the book could also be linked to the description of the Virgin of Guadalupe as 'Empress of the Americas' by Pope Pius XII.

⁴⁷ Jeanette Rodriguez, 'Guadalupe: The Feminine Face of God', in *Goddess of the Americas*, pp. 25-30.

⁴⁸ Cherrie Moraga, 'El mito azteca', in *Goddess of the Americas*, pp. 68-71 (p. 70).

⁴⁹ Sandra Cisneros, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', in *Goddess of the Americas*, pp. 46-51 (p. 50).

beginning, God was a woman.³⁰ Elinor Gadon, another scholar who investigates the Goddess archetype, explains how the goddess worship was terminated:

The demise of the Goddess can be traced back to the invasions of warlike nomadic peoples from the Asiatic and European north who overran the centers of Goddess culture in southeastern Europe, the Near East, and India causing large-scale destruction and dislocation. They brought with them their sky gods who ruled from heavens like despots. The Goddess, women, and their values were suppressed.³¹

Chicanas' reconstruction of Guadalupe as a goddess can be associated with the contemporary resurgence of goddess worship. In her book on Chicana feminism, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Ana Castillo adopts a similar approach, stating that 'I see the Guadalupe cult as an unspoken, if not unconscious, devotion to their own version of the Goddess.' (p. 48) In her discussion of the contemporary revival of the Goddess, Gadon also claims that contemporary visual artists are beginning to understand and express this 'long-suppressed imagery' (p. 309), highlighting those aspects, such as sexuality, that were abolished with the arrival of a patriarchal society. Although she only deals with visual and performing artists, her views are connected with the ideology expressed by Chicanas such as Cisneros. As Gadon explains, the reclamation of the Goddess entails the recuperation of those threatening aspects that were subdued with the arrival of Christianity: 'Goddess religion was [...] body-affirming not body-denying' (p. xii); the Goddess 'is becoming [...] a model for resacralizing woman's body and the mystery of human sexuality.' (p. xv) This is another direction undertaken in the Chicanas' reconstruction of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Anzaldúa argues that during the Conquest, the Spaniards 'desexed Guadalupe, taking Coatloqueuh, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making *la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen Maria* into

³⁰ Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 1.

³¹ Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), p. xiii. There is an extensive bibliography on the existence of matriarchal cultures. See also J. J. Bacholen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right. Selected Writings* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1967), Maruja Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, 2nd edn (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996)

chaste virgins and *Tlazolteotl/Coatlicue/la Chingada* into *putas* [whores][...].⁵²

Research into the origins of Guadalupe leads Sandra Cisneros to the discovery of deities that represented different aspects of sexuality. The acknowledgment of this information enables her to rename the Virgin as 'Guadalupe Sex Goddess' and thus to accept her:

I have had to search for her in the rubble of history. And I have found her. She is Guadalupe the sex goddess, a goddess who makes me feel good about my sexual power, my sexual energy [...] In my research of Guadalupe's pre-Columbian antecedents, the she before the Church desexed her, I found Tonantzin, and inside Tonantzin a pantheon of other mother goddesses. I discovered Tlazolteotl, the goddess of fertility and sex, also referred to as Totzin [...] Tlazolteotl, then is a duality of maternity *and* sexuality. In other words, she is a sexy mama.⁵³

Decoding the Virgin as a mother and a sexualised individual humanizes this figure and thus brings her closer to the 'ordinary' woman. Rather than reading Guadalupe as a heavenly creature with unrealistic virtues, Cisneros interprets her as a figure with human characteristics. This likeness between the icon and the writer enables the latter to not only embrace her but also to compare her body to the Virgin's, as we see in this passage:

Once, watching a porn film, I saw a sight that terrified me. It was the film star's *panocha* [vagina] - a tidy, elliptical opening, pink and shiny like a rabbit's ear. [...] I think what startled me most was the realization that my own sex has no resemblance to this woman's. My sex, dark as an orchid, rubbery and blue purple as *pulpo*, an octopus, does not look nice and tidy, but otherworldly. I do not have little rosette nipples. My nipples are big and brown, like the Mexican coins of my childhood.

When I see *la Virgen de Guadalupe* I want to lift her dress as I did my dolls' and look to see if she comes with *chones* [underwear], and does her *panocha* look like mine, and does she have dark nipples too? Yes, I am certain she does. She is not neuter like Barbie.⁵⁴

The narrator, unable to identify her body amongst female mainstream visual representations (Barbie doll, porn actress), turns to the most popular Mexican woman in order to perceive her own body as 'normal'. This passage illustrates the ways in which Guadalupe functions not only as a gendered icon, but also most importantly, as a racial one.

⁵² *Borderlands*, pp. 27-8.

⁵³ Cisneros, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', in *Goddess of the Americas*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 50-1.

Another transgressive reading can be seen in the figure of Guadalupe. Rubén Martínez names her the 'undocumented virgin', referring to the large number of Mexicans who cross the border into the United States illegally:

She continues to accompany Mexicans as they cross the border at the Rio Grande, and remains the most powerful of Chicana icons for Mexicans who've been trapped on the "other side" for generations. Guadalupe, in the end, proclaims a vast spiritual region that ignores the political demarcations that divide California and Mexico. Through Her intercession, a Mexican remains Mexican in California, an Indian remains Indian in Mexico.⁵⁵

Despite their illegitimate and vulnerable situation, Mexican illegal immigrants find comfort in the fact that – due to the vast Mexican population in the U.S. – the image of Guadalupe is found everywhere.⁵⁶ Martínez mentions the comment of a Mexican woman who believes 'the holiday for *la Virgen* might be more important to Mexicans here [United States] than back home.' (p.111) The re-articulation of the Virgin of Guadalupe by Chicanos/as is just another example of certain cultural and religious aspects of Mexican life acquiring another significance in the U.S.⁵⁷ The Virgin of Guadalupe is not merely a religious icon; she also functions as a subversive symbol that affirms a racial identity. Chicanos/as' re-articulations epitomize Jacques Lafaye's argument: 'each historical moment is capable of giving a sacred "recharge" to a pious image, by endowing it with a new power adapted to new aspirations.' (p. 310)

What becomes clear from the different renderings of the Virgin of Guadalupe is that due to her extensive idolization, she has become a multifaceted icon, providing different messages to different gendered, classed and social groups. This is best

⁵⁵ Rubén Martínez, 'The Undocumented Virgin', in *Goddess of the Americas*, ed. by Castillo, pp. 98-112, (p. 101).

⁵⁶ See Jacqueline Orsini Dunnigton's book *Viva Guadalupe!* where the author exposes the different ways in which the Virgin is venerated across New Mexico. This book shows the diverse places in which her image can be found: candles, tattoos, mouse pads or murals. Jacqueline Orsini Dunnigton, *Viva Guadalupe! The Virgin in New Mexico Popular Art* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1997)

⁵⁷ Depending on her location, the Virgin of Guadalupe can obtain different significations. This icon is also venerated in a small village called La Pereda in Asturias, Spain. Since many people from that village migrated to Mexico, Guadalupe represents the connection of that area with Mexico. Being the patron saint, each 2nd of August this village venerates her. Her image is wrapped in a Spanish flag and Mexican sarape, suggesting that she represents a connection between these two countries.

illustrated in the words of Cisneros: 'I'm very, very much devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but not exactly the same figure celebrated in Church.'⁵⁸ Her interpretation of the icon differs from the ways Guadalupe is imagined by other sectors of the Mexican/Chicano/a population. As with the figure of La Malinche, the diverse interpretations of the Virgin of Guadalupe are mirrored in the different names: Virgin of Tepeyac stresses her place of origin, Brown Virgin expresses her racial identity, Guadalupe-Tonantzin articulates her indigenous background.⁵⁹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues that it is precisely the multiple identities that Guadalupe embodies that enable him to embrace her: 'She understands my multiple dilemmas and contradictions.' (p. 183)

Guadalupe in the visual arts

'As an artist, I feel entitled to express my relationship to her in a way relevant to my own experiences.'⁶⁰

The re-significations of the Virgin of Guadalupe also take place in the visual arts, provoking controversy and heated responses. Even though my intention is to deal with the literary representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, I believe we must also address the visually artistic counterpart of this revision.⁶¹ The visual re-articulations of the icon manifest a similar feminist project to that taking place in the literary sphere.⁶²

One of the earliest visual re-articulations of Guadalupe was created by Ester Hernández in 1975. The etching *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos*

⁵⁸ Cisneros, 'Interview with Reed Way Dasenbrock', p. 292.

This message is also expressed in her writing in *Goddess of the Americas* where she says 'My *Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the mother of God'. The use of the adjective 'my' conveys that the writer has her own interpretation of this figure.

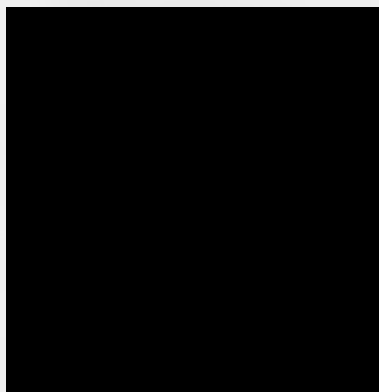
⁵⁹ La Malinche is also known as Marina (indicating her Spanish identity after conversion), Malintzin (her indigenous name), and La Chingada (expressing her passive and treacherous character).

⁶⁰ Alma López, <http://www.almalopez.net/artist.html>

⁶¹ For an examination of the traditional artistic representations of Guadalupe, see the edition dedicated to her 'Visiones de Guadalupe' in *Artes de México*, 29.

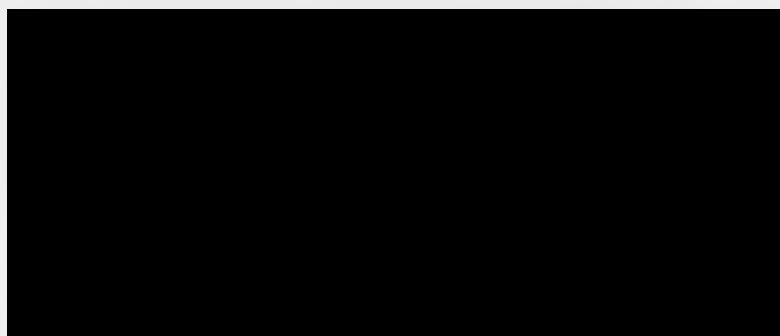
⁶² The Virgin of Guadalupe is a constant presence in the work of Chicano/a artists. See for instance Rosa M.'s *Madre de las Americas* and *Soy tu madre*; Amado M. Peña, Jr.'s *Rosa del Tepeyac* (1974); Rupert García's *La Virgen y Yo* (1984); Santa Barraza's *La Lupe Tejana* (1995).

de los Xicanos [The Virgin Defending Xicanos' Rights] portrays the Virgin as a karate woman. Under her feet the traditional benign angel is presented as an angry figure raising his arms.



Instead of looking down in a compassionate manner and with folded hands, Guadalupe stands in a defiant pose, kicking her leg. The use of the word 'defending' in the title suggests that the Virgin is no longer a passive figure that consoles her people but that is here to protect them, even aggressively. By stating that she is looking after 'Xicanos', Hernández mirrors the importance of this icon amongst the Mexican-American community. Yolanda López is another Chicana who also re-signifies the religious icon in her work. The famous 1978 Guadalupe's Triptych presents three different generations of women from Lopez's family – herself, her mother and grandmother – as Guadalupe. *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* represents a muscular young woman running with a snake in one hand and the starred cloak on the other. She is running over the classical angel depicted at the Virgin's feet, which is now subdued. The second image depicts Margaret F. Steward, her mother, as a seamstress working on the Virgin's cloak, with roses and the angel at her feet. The third image presents Victoria F. Franco, her grandmother sitting on a stool covered with the Virgin's cloak, the angel behind her. The woman

is skinning a snake with a knife. These representations imply that these women's ordinary lives are as sacred and meaningful as the Virgin's. The presence of the snake in these images evokes the indigenous aspect of Guadalupe, since many of the goddesses from which she descends are related to the reptile. Particularly recalled is Coatlixopeuh, She Who Has Dominion over Serpents, since both the young woman and the grandmother seem to have control over the snake: one firmly holds it, the other one has killed it and skins it.⁶³



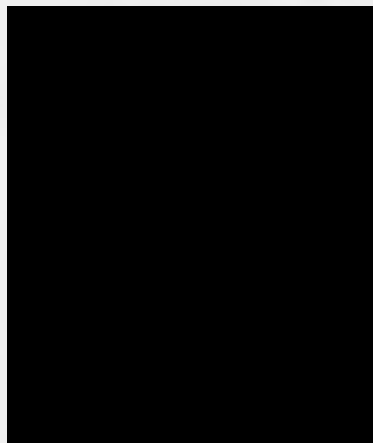
In an interview the artist argues that the motivation behind this series was the realization that the only female role model for Chicanas was this religious figure, '[...] so I looked [...] to see what it did for us women. She was a role model; that's what public images do, they feed us back a way that we should be, a way to compare ourselves to what we are.'⁶⁴ In another instance, she claims that her intention was to present Guadalupe as "jumping off the crescent moon, jumping off the pedestal she's been given by Chicanos."⁶⁵ López suggests that humanizing the Virgin and turning her into an ordinary woman will enable Chicanas to relate to her and thus to empower themselves.

⁶³ The indigenous aspect of Guadalupe is again highlighted in another López's piece, *Guadalupe-Tonantzin* (1978) in which the indigenous deity Tonantzin is represented with elements pertaining to the Catholic icon such as her cloak and half moon.

⁶⁴ Yolanda López, 'Artist Provocateur. An Interview with Yolanda López', *Crossroads* (May 1993), 14-18 (p. 18).

⁶⁵ Quoted in Gaspar de Alba, p. 141.

López attempted once again to make Guadalupe more human in an image she created for the Mexican feminist magazine *Fem*. Guadalupe is portrayed in her usual compassionate pose - looking down, folded hands - but wearing a dress and high heels. She is walking, rather than standing still as in traditional representations, stressing her new active identity.⁶⁶ The cover of this magazine in June-July 1984 provoked such anger that the office received a bomb threat.⁶⁷ López again suggests that it is high time that the Virgin ceases to be idolised as an unreachable role model and begins to be seen as a more accessible icon.



Gaspar de Alba argues that 'Both Hernández's and López's portrayals of the Guadalupana alter the passive femininity of the traditional image to communicate feminist empowerment through change and physical action.' (p. 141) If the inclusion of feminist issues in the re-articulations of Guadalupe had already caused some

⁶⁶ Chicana artist Alma López believes this image instigated anger because 'the Virgen was able to walk away, especially if she didn't care to listen to someone's prayers'. Alma López, 'Artist Statement', <http://www.almalopez.net/artist.html>

⁶⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings. New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: New Press, 2000), p. 42. This is not the first time the alteration of the Virgin of Guadalupe's image provokes such violent responses. In 1987, Rolando de la Rosa presented a montage of Guadalupe with Marilyn Monroe's face and naked breasts in Mexico City. Lippard states 'It detonated protests against "satanic blasphemy" by thousands who were ready to lynch the artist, [...]' (p. 43)

controversy, it is no surprise that the presence of themes related to sexuality was going to provoke an even greater polemic.

Esther Hernández's serigraph *La Ofrenda* (the offering) was placed on the cover of the 1991 anthology *Chicana Lesbians*, edited by Carla Trujillo. The image depicts a masculine looking woman whose back has a large tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁶⁸ A hand coming from the left corner offers a red rose (an item associated with the legend of the apparition of the Virgin).



The serigraph plays with ambiguity since it does not become clear to whom the red rose is offered: is it to the image of the Virgin or to the tattooed woman? Another reading could reveal that the offering is made to the lesbian woman who embraces the religious icon and what it represents. By positing a lesbian woman who honours the Virgin to the extent of inscribing her body with the image, Hernández suggests that Chicana lesbians also feel identified with the Mexican icon and have the right to venerate her. Another interpretation could be that lesbian women sexually desire the Virgin. As a result of the outrage that this image provoked, the author, having been 'harassed and threatened so intensely by certain people in the community felt it was

⁶⁸ The woman's masculine looks and the context in which this serigraph became known (an anthology on lesbian literature) lead one to assume that the woman is lesbian.

in her best interest to remove the piece from the book's cover for any future printings.⁶⁹ Although the image of Guadalupe remains unchanged (in opposition to, for instance, López's depictions), its inclusion in a homosexual context subverts the messages of submission, femininity and heterosexuality implicit in the icon. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues that this image also transgresses the practices surrounding the tattooing of religious figures:

Within Chicano culture, the full-back tattoo depicted in "La ofrenda" is a real practice which, while working-class marked and (generally but not always) masculine-gender specific, is not necessarily seen as taboo or irreverent. [...] For viewers from classes and cultures that do not practice this *particular* mode of inscribing [...], Hernández's image provides the frisson of "exotic", "primitive", "savage", or even "criminal" alterity. Within the context of working-class Chicano culture, the female body merely replaces the male's as the normative site of venerating tattoo.⁷⁰

The appropriation of a masculine practice on the part of the female protagonist underlines her sexuality and her 'transgression', and by implication 'offends' the image of the religious icon by incorporating it into her body. Carla Trujillo defends the appropriation of Guadalupe by Chicana lesbians, arguing that they have the same right as 'heterosexual Mexicanas/Chicanas [who] have redefined La Virgen to suit their needs.' (p. 220)

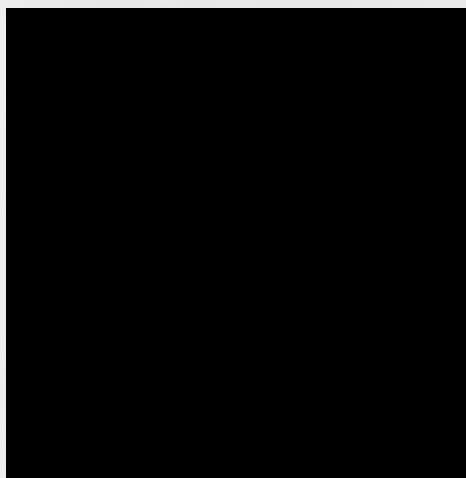
Alma López, another Chicana visual artist lays claim to a similar argument to defend her re-articulation of Guadalupe in her digital print 'Our Lady'. But, the controversy caused by her work has opened a new chapter in the history surrounding the revision of the Virgin of Guadalupe. 'Our Lady' (1999) took part in the 'Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology' exhibition at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico (February 2001-February 2002). The show's curator, Tey Marianna Nunn, explains that the goal of the exhibition is "to showcase the manner in which the artists translate and recast their deeply rooted cultural beliefs,

⁶⁹ Ester Hernández, quoted in Carla Trujillo, 'La Virgen de Guadalupe and Her Reconstruction in Chicana Lesbian Desire', in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo, pp. 214-31 (p. 217).

⁷⁰ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, 'The Lesbian Body in Latina Cultural Production', in *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, ed. by Bergmann and Smith, pp. 181-97 (pp. 183-84).

images and history by utilizing computers to create a new type of visual art".⁷¹ Alma López contributes to the exhibition with 'Our Lady', a computerized photo collage portraying the Virgin of Guadalupe wearing a sort of bikini made of roses. The Virgin, hands on her hips, staring insolently, stands on a half moon and on a bare breasted female angel who seems to lift her up. The Virgin's cloak has imprinted on it carved stone images, possibly a reference to the indigenous goddess Tonantzin. López's image is her response to Sandra Cisneros's essay 'Guadalupe Sex Goddess' where the writer expresses her desire to lift the Virgin's robes in order to find a similar body to hers. López explains that she visualizes roses underneath the dress:

Roses were the proof of her apparition to Juan Diego. Abstracted plants and flowers are imprinted on her dress. Among the other symbolism in her depiction and apparition, flowers and roses make the connection to the fact that she is a native. [...] When I imagined the image of "Our Lady", I saw a contemporary representation of a Latina woman covered with flowers.⁷²



The display of this work has received enormous opposition from the Catholic and Chicano/Latino community of Santa Fe. The protest, led by activist José Villegas and Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, argues that López's work is offensive due to the presence of nudity and thus insults the image of the Virgin. The protesters requested the withdrawal of the digital work from the exhibition as well as the removal of the

⁷¹ Tey Marianna Nunn, quoted in Sarah King, 'Santa Fe Madonna Sparks Forestorm', *Art in America*, 89.6, 23-25 (p. 23).

⁷² Alma López, 'Artist Statement', in <http://www.almalopez.net/artist.html>

Museum Director.⁷³ Alma López defends the presence of nudity in her work maintaining that images of nude and semi-nude figures such as angels and Jesus Christ abound in churches without causing offence. She claims that the presence of women's naked breast is not meant to be an erotic image but rather a homage to women's nurturing capacity. Like other artists, López explains that her work represents her frustration at the lack of female role models for Chicanas.⁷⁴ This image expresses the need to revamp the religious icon in order that ordinary women relate to her in a positive and empowering way. López argues that her revised Virgin is 'a strong Indígena/Chicana/Latina/Mexicana, and not [...] the young passive (head bowed with clasped hands) image that I grew up seeing in my home and in my community.'⁷⁵

López reconstructs the Virgin in another digital piece, and even though the theme presented is – in my opinion – more controversial than the one articulated in *Our Lady*, it has not received as much exposure, probably due to the smaller circulation of the piece.⁷⁶ 'Lupe and Sirena in Love' (1999) portrays Guadalupe and a mermaid in an erotic pose. The mermaid image belongs to the Mexican bingo game 'lotería' which presents different emblems of Mexican culture.⁷⁷ The Virgin, depicted in the traditional guise, is touching the mermaid's breast. Although the image of both (heterosexual) icons remains unchanged, their traditional representation is subverted by their 'lesbianization'.⁷⁸ The relationship between these Mexican icons is framed within a specific geographical setting: behind them lies Los Angeles city and

⁷³ For more information on the campaign organised to protest against the artists visit Ana López's website <http://www.almalopez.net> and refer to Sarah King's article.

⁷⁴ See her comments on her internet page at <http://www.almalopez.net/artist.html>

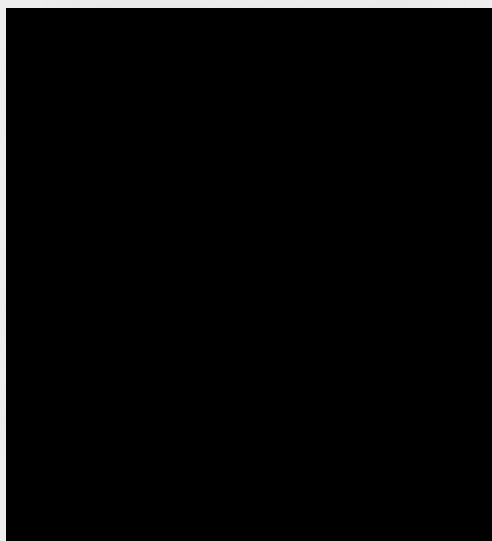
⁷⁵ Response letter to Jose Villegas by Alma López, posted in <http://www.almalopez.net/emails/em031701b.html>

⁷⁶ *Lupe and Sirena in Love* was created for a part flyer for a lesbian/bisexual women of colour event. See Alma López, 'Mermaids, Butterflies, and Princesses', *Aztlán*, 25:1 (2000), 189-91 (p. 189).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁷⁸ In her article 'The Lesbian Body in Latina Cultural Production', Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues that the 'lesbianization' of icons of popular culture is a common practice in Latina/Chicana art. (p. 182)

underneath them, there are images of the United States-Mexico border. On the wall that separates these two countries, 1848 (a reference to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo where Mexico ceded part of its territory to the United States) appears superimposed on an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In comparison to the other visual reconfigurations of Guadalupe, López's Virgin is accompanied by another figure, allowing a reading of the icon as lover, rather than merely as a mother. Also, by positioning the mermaid as her lover, López challenges the cultural frame that sets these two Mexican figures as heterosexual.



The traditional angel under the Virgin is substituted by a Viceroy butterfly. In her essay 'Mermaids, Butterflies and Princesses' López explains the reasons for choosing this specific butterfly:

The Viceroy and Monarch butterflies look exactly alike except that the Viceroy has a black stripe on its secondary wings. The Monarch butterfly is known for its natural yearly migration from Mexico to the United States. However, the most remarkable aspect of this migration is that on its flight back to Mexico or the northern United States, it is no longer the original butterfly, but it is the child returning guided by genetic memory. Like the Monarch butterfly, indigenous people of this continent have migrated between both countries. Yet, as of 1848 [...] a border has been erected, impeding this natural migration. So we tend to get stuck on one side or the other. Our families are divided. I thought it was interesting that the Viceroy butterfly mimics the Monarch for survival purposes. The Monarch butterfly is poisonous to predators, but the Viceroy is not. The Viceroy

pretends to be something it is not just to be able to exist. For me, the Viceroy mirrors parallel and intersecting histories of being different or "other" even within our own communities. Racist attitudes see Latinos as criminals and an economic burden, and homophobic attitudes even within our own communities and families may see us as perverted or deviant. So from outside and inside our communities, we are perceived as something we are not. When in essence, we are those vulnerable Viceroy butterflies, trying to live and survive. (pp. 189-90)

The Viceroy butterfly invokes, on the one hand, the history of dislocation and migration of the Mexican people, and on the other, the necessity of some Chicanas/as to disguise themselves as heterosexual or Anglo in order to be accepted in society. By locating the sexual relationship of two Mexican female icons within specific political and social issues, López suggests that the lesbian love affair between two Chicanas is affected by factors other than sexuality or gender. This image is redolent of Anzaldúa's and Moraga's expression 'many-headed demons of oppression' which addresses the intricate manners in which different systems of oppression are linked to repress Third World Women.⁷⁹

By incorporating gender, sexual, social, and political issues into the re-articulation of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the writers and artists herein discussed manifest an endeavour to bring the religious icon out of her traditional realm. The important number of re-symbolizations of this icon suggests that Chicanas feel authorised to re-articulate this symbol of idealized womanhood in such a way that they feel more able to relate to her. These works contradict the assumption that the Virgin of Guadalupe is a one-dimensional icon, and reveal that she can be interpreted very differently across generations.

⁷⁹ Anzaldúa and Moraga state 'As Third World Women, we are especially vulnerable to the many-headed demon of oppression. We are the women at the bottom.' In *This Bridge Called My Back*, p. 19.

***So Far From God* : a Chicana re-interpretation of religious practices and icons.**

"Come down [...] we'll all pray for you."

"No, Padre," she corrected him. "Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*." With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed.⁸⁰

Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* is a novel that, like other Chicano/a texts, adopts a subversive approach towards religious discourse. Without dealing specifically with the Virgin of Guadalupe, this text also questions the viability of religious practices and icons to help and guide Chicanas. Set in New Mexico, *So Far From God* narrates a succession of dramatic events that affects a family comprised of Sofia and her four daughters.⁸¹ Esperanza (hope), the eldest daughter, is a broadcast journalist committed to social and political activities. She is sent to report on the Gulf War but she and her crew are tortured and murdered. Fe's (faith) obsession with attaining the American Dream and marrying, lead her to disregard her family and reject her roots. But, her aspirations are dashed when she contracts cancer and dies as a result of having handled carcinogenic materials in the factory where she worked. Caridad (charity) is a nurse whose spare time is filled with casual sex until one night she is gang raped and mutilated. After miraculously overcoming her physical condition, she discovers she possesses healing powers and becomes a *curandera*, guided by Doña Felicia. After her assault, she begins a lesbian relationship. During a trip with her lover, an Indian tarot reader, they are absorbed by the deity *Tsichtinako*, disappearing under the earth. La Loca (the mad woman), the youngest daughter, dies at the age of three but mysteriously resuscitates during her funeral, which leads the community to believe that she is a saint. From the moment of her resurrection, La Loca acquires magical and healing powers, but leads a reclusive life, only allowing physical contact with her mother. Surprisingly, she dies from AIDS. Since the succession of shocking events cannot be rationally explained, Sofia is convinced that the tragic existence of

⁸⁰ Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (New York: Plume, 1994), p. 24.

⁸¹ The title refers to an alleged comment by Porfirio Díaz who said: 'Poor Mexico, so far from God, so near the United States'.

her four daughters is attributable to them being either saints or martyrs. For this reason, she funds M.O.M.A.S., the Mothers of Martyrs and Saints Association, that evolves into a world-wide and successful organisation that helps mothers identify whether their children are saints and martyrs, as well as help them to come to terms with their often tragic lives.⁸²

The creation of new saints and martyrs at the end of the novel strongly undermines the official Catholic saints who are upheld as examples of virtue and martyrdom.⁸³ M.O.M.A.S. functions as an alternative Catholic organisation since not only does it have a female leader, but it also decides who becomes a saint or martyr. By naming women like Fe and La Loca as saints and martyrs, the organization does not stress the victimization suffered by these individuals, but questions the reasons that lead these women to be ill-treated. The proclamation of ordinary Chicanas as saints and martyrs means that the female population are presented with new religious figures to relate to.⁸⁴ Failing to identify with the virtuous female saints upheld by the Catholic Church, women can associate for instance with Caridad, a lesbian Chicana. In this way, La Loca is venerated as the Patron of the Mysterious Illnesses, and the Patron of All Poor Creatures, although the narrator states that she

was not particularly noted for answering the pleas of the desperate and hopeless... In other words, people never really could figure out who La Loca protected and oversaw as a rule, or what she was good to pray to about. In general, though, it was considered a good idea to have a little statue of La Loca in your kitchen and to give one as a good luck gift to new brides and progressive grooms. (p. 248)

⁸² It is no surprise that the unrealistic and over-dramatic plot of the novel has lead Sandra Cisneros to compare it with a soap opera: '[...] Ana Castillo has gone and done what I always wanted to do – written a Chicana *telenovela* [...]' (book's back cover)

⁸³ The novel allows a discussion of numerous themes and issues. For the purposes of clarity, I am only dealing with the ways in which Castillo elaborates an alternative religious system. For a broader discussion of the text see: Carmela Delia Lanza, 'Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*', *MELUS*, 23:1 (1998), 65-78; Gail Pérez, 'Ana Castillo as Santera: Reconstructing Popular Religious Praxis', *Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*, 2:1, (1998), 64-101; Kamala Platt, 'Ecocritical Chicana Literature: Ana Castillo's "Virtual Realism"', in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 139-157; Theresa Delgadillo, 'Forms of Chicana Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44:4 (1998), 888-916.

⁸⁴ Castillo's creation of alternative saints and martyrs recalls the existence of the unofficial saint of illegal immigrants San Juan Soldado. Those attempting to cross the border visit his shrine in Tijuana. This figure will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

In an interview, Ana Castillo mentions that she referred to the *Dictionary of Saints* for background on the main characters.⁸⁵ In her book on Chicana feminism, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, she manifests her discrepancy with the Church's representation of female saints: 'Most of our female saints, maintained as models, established their beatitude by repudiating sex. Further more, female saints and martyrs are upheld as models because of their ability to forgive their attacker, an act that permits repetitions of such violations.' (p. 129) The association portrayed in *So Far from God* provides alternative models to the official figures, designating as saints and martyrs women whom the Church would not consider for canonization, that is, working-class coloured women.⁸⁶ The novel brings the concept of female sainthood and martyrdom to a more realistic level, transforming women who have led a life of exploitation, racial and sexual abuse into examples of life's contemporary injustices. Castillo suggests that the *real* victims and martyrs are the working-class coloured women that live in the community. Another evidence that Castillo is attempting to reconstruct the concept of religious icon is found in the miraculous recoveries of the main protagonists, a characteristic of many saints and martyrs.⁸⁷ La Loca resuscitates during her funeral (although she is later diagnosed as epileptic); Caridad amazingly recovers from an extremely violent attack: 'For those with charity in their hearts, the mutilation of the lovely young woman was akin to

⁸⁵ See <http://www.pstat.ucsb.edu/~rodrigue/anatalk.stm>

⁸⁶ Sofia's family can also be interpreted as an alternative to the Anglo-American family portrayed in the media. This is the argument proposed by Carmela Delia Lanza who claims that *So Far from God* 'offers a postmodern inversion of Alcott's *Little Women*', 'Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*', p. 66.

⁸⁷ For instance, Saint Cecilia (3rd century) escaped death on two occasions: once she was condemned to be asphyxiated in the bath but was unharmed. On another, the executioner who was meant to behead her somehow missed. Saint Catherine of Alexandria (4th century), Christian virgin and martyr, was sentenced to be broken at the wheel, but this instrument miraculously failed. See David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978)

martyrdom.⁸⁸ (p. 33) Sofia refers to Caridad's healing as 'Holy Restoration' (p. 43) In Castillo's fictional world, an alternative Church acknowledges the social and political issues that affect the Latino/a population such as rape and AIDS.

The apprehension towards the official Church is also manifested by the undermined position of the male characters and figures in the novel. Sofia becomes president of M.O.M.A.S.⁸⁹, counteracting the head figure of the Pope.⁹⁰ During the M.O.M.A.S. conventions 'Masses were held by women [...]' (p. 250). Only mothers are permitted entrance into the association, in contrast to the celibate men of the Catholic Church. The narrator ironically compares the requirements for entry into the Catholic Church with those of M.O.M.A.S.:

But for a long time, a rumour followed las M.O.M.A.S. that the appointed board member Mothers were made to sit on chairs much like the ones that popes back in the beginning of their days were made to sit on after a woman who passed herself off as a man had been elected pope. In other words, a chair that was structured to *prove* that you were in fact a "mom" or, at least, could have been. (p. 252)

This alternative Catholic organisation becomes so popular that a commercial enterprise develops around it. During the annual conference 'useless products and souvenirs' related to the organisation are sold:

For example, there were your T-shirts with such predictable stencilled phrases as "The Twenty Third Annual Convention of M.O.M.A.S., Flushing, N.Y." [...], or "My Mother Is A Member of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints - Genuflect, Please!", the usual posters, stationary, forever-burning votive candles with your favorite saints' or martyr's picture stuck on [...], "automatic writing" pens, and then, of course, the all-time favorite - La Loca Santa and her Sisters Tarot Deck drawn by a lovely artist in Sardina, Italy. (pp. 249-50)

The commodification of M.O.M.A.S. is linked with a wider tendency to turn into exotic objects of consumption those aspects of Latin America culture that are easily stereotyped. Even though the commercialisation of M.O.M.A.S. demonstrates

⁸⁸ Gail Perez argues that Caridad's experiences are based on Saint Clare's life. See 'Ana Castillo as Santera: Reconstructing Popular Religious Praxis', p. 76. Saint Clare was an abbess in Assisi who according to Farmer, led a life of 'extreme poverty and austerity.' (p. 81)

⁸⁹ M.O.M.A.S. strongly recalls Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, an organization created by mothers in 1977 to denounce the disappearance of their children during the Argentinean dictatorship. In her book about this organization, Marguerite Guzman Boulard argues that a subversive aspect of this group lays in their challenge to the notion of woman as 'homebound and submissive' (p. 8), an idea echoed in Castillo's novel. See *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1995)

⁹⁰ Jacqueline Doyle argues a similar point as she says '[...] Sofia's organization of women functions as an alternative "communion of saints" outside the jurisdiction of the Vatican.' (p. 191)

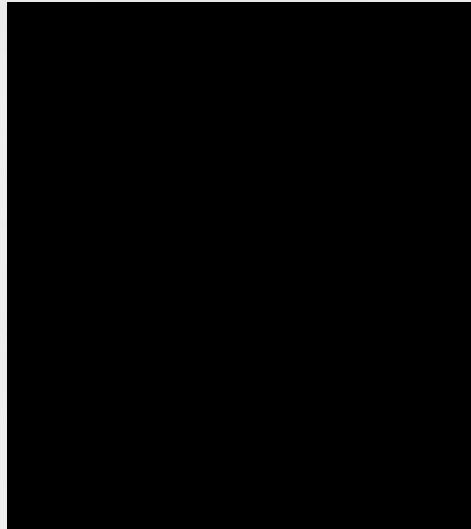
that it has become a successful and popular organisation, it also means that its aims and messages are simplified and essentialised in the name of marketing.

Castillo's willingness to devise an alternative Catholic Church is also evident in her attempt at revising the ultimate Christian male figure, Jesus Christ. The lives of Caridad and La Loca echo episodes from Christ's life: both of them 'resurrect', both heal thanks to their knowledge and miraculous power, Caridad performs miracles. But it is the youngest daughter La Loca who assumes the role of messiah right at the start of the novel. After resurrecting and flying to the church roof during her funeral, La Loca announces to the crowd that God sent her back 'to help you all, to pray for you all.' (p. 24) Father Jerome asks the girl to come down and tells her 'we'll pray for you' but Loca 'corrected him. "No, Padre, [...] Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*."' With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed.' (p. 24) The child's defiance of Father Jerome as well as her proclamation of sanctity at the beginning of the novel underlines, once again, the need to challenge the dictates of the patriarchal Catholic Church.⁹¹

The depiction of the main female characters as religious icons mirrors a painting by Frida Kahlo entitled *The Broken Column* in which Kahlo herself is represented as a martyr with nails puncturing her naked body. Her torso is bisected by a cracked ionic column, and is constricted by a white corset. Kahlo's biographer Hayden Herrera states that *The Broken Column* was painted in 1944, after Kahlo had undergone surgery and was obliged to wear a steel corset.⁹²

⁹¹ Theresa Delgadillo also points out Loca's similarity with Christ, arguing that Castillo 'substitut[es] a Chicana resurrection for Christ's resurrection, and accordingly creat[es] an alternative religious history or perhaps a new myth.' (p. 895)

⁹² Hayden Herrera, *A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 76.



But, even though the woman represented in the self-portrait is crying, she stares straight ahead, with a defiant look.⁹³ Contrasting the traditional representations of wounded saints and martyrs in which the protagonist looks disheartened, Kahlo defiantly conveys that she will not succumb to the pain. Herrera explains that these representations display how 'the role of the heroic sufferer became an integral part of Frida: the mask became the face' (p. 76). By imagining herself as a rebellious female martyr, Kahlo conceives an alternative religious figure she could worship and thus obtain strength.⁹⁴ Both Castillo and Kahlo imply that familiar icons should be reconstructed in order to fulfil the worshipper's needs.

By re-writing key religious icons that have traditionally been upheld as role models, Castillo is, by implication, condemning the lack of connection between these role models and 'normal' individuals; something already articulated by the female

⁹³ Herrera argues that this wounded Frida suggests a 'Mexican Saint Sebastian' (p. 77) Saint Sebastian was condemned to be shot by archers by emperor Diocletian.

⁹⁴ The lack of Mexican female role models at the time could have influenced her to create a new icon she could look up to. When asked to paint the portraits of the five most important Mexican women, Kahlo complained about the lack of information relating to them. In an amusing letter to her friend Dr. Eloesser, she wrote: 'Now they've got me trying to find out what kind of cockroaches those women were [...] so that at the hour when I daub them the public will know how to distinguish them from the vulgar and common females of Mexico - who I will tell you, in my opinion, would include more interesting and more terrific women than the group of ladies in question.' Quoted in Herrera, p. 320. It is interesting that Kahlo believed that ordinary women are more worthy of appraisal than those upheld as role models, a message implicit in *So Far from God*.

artists that reconfigure the Virgin of Guadalupe. The individual's lack of empathy with these role models is reminiscent of the Teresa de Lauretis's distinction between the concepts *woman* and *women*:

woman, the other-from-man [...] is the term that designates at once the vanishing point of our culture's fictions of itself [...]. By *women*, on the other hand, I will mean the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations. [...] The relation between women as historical subjects and the notion of woman as it is produced by hegemonic discourses is neither a direct relation of simple implication.⁹⁵

The danger of such dictates is exemplified in the episode where Caridad unexpectedly leaves her family and Felicia to live for a year in a cave in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The amazement produced by this news leads some people in the community to believe that she is a holy being. Pilgrimages are organised to her cave with the aim of asking favours of the 'Santita Armitaña':

Unbeknownst to Caridad, however, down below some of the daily newspapers had reported the pilgrimage to her mountain with "eyewitnesses" who had supposedly seen her. Some claimed to have been touched and blessed by her and still some others insisted that she had cured them! One man said that when he laid eyes on her, he saw a beautiful halo radiate around her whole body, like the Virgen de Guadalupe, and that she had relieved him of his drinking problem. (p. 90)

The unconventional and reclusive life style of Caridad induces the community to believe that it is a characteristic of her holy nature, rather than to realize that it is as a result of traumatic experience.⁹⁶ The idealization of Caridad stems from the inability to differentiate between *woman* and *women*, between model and individual. Even after losing her four daughters, Sofia refuses to emulate the role models she has been exposed to and rejects the role of 'suffering mother', or 'mad woman'. Instead, she invests her efforts in establishing an organisation that helps childless mothers like herself. In an interview, Castillo explains that the creation of M.O.M.A.S. at the end of the book arose out of the need to

⁹⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5-6.

⁹⁶ Theresa Delgadillo expresses a similar view, arguing that Francisco perpetuates this type of female archetypes: 'Francisco's veneration of his deceased mother [...], coupled with his alternating disgust for and adoration of Caridad [...], comprise the dangerous extremes of the objectification of women [...] that will eventually lead him to violence against Caridad and Esmeralda.' (902)

give the ending a hopeful note because otherwise it would have been quite tragic with all the characters dying off [...] I projected it into the future where there will always be problems, but people are always trying to work them out. [...] [Sofia] takes over. She doesn't submit to that point in history when patriarchy took over her authority.⁹⁷

Castillo also exposes the history of colonization and appropriation inherent in some Catholic icons. When discussing the figure of *Nuestro Señor de Esquipúlas*, 'the black Christ of the far-off land of the converted Indians of Esquipúlas', the narrator mentions that 'shortly after his appearance, the Catholic Church endorsed as sacred what the Native peoples had known all along since the beginning of time.' (p. 73) In another instance, we are informed that Felicia, the *curandera*, disliked the saint *Niño de Atocha* because 'he once saved Christians from pagan Indians. (This was part of doña Felicia's problem with the little saint in Spanish regal dress, trying to accept that he saved souls or abandoned them depending on their nationalistic faith.)' (p. 82) Castillo discloses the power relations embedded in religious practices and exposes the manipulation of native icons.

The figure and practices of the *curandera*, Felicia, represent an alternative religious (and healing) figure and practices to the ones offered by the official Church. The figure of the *curandera* embodies the syncretism between indigenous and Catholic belief systems, and thus a threat to the unmixed practices of official Catholicism:

Felicia was a non-believer of sorts and remained that way, suspicious of the religion that did not help the destitute all around her despite their devotion. [...], finally, she did develop faith, based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of the wise teachers that she met along the way. (p. 60)

This old woman practices the healing art of *curanderismo* by using ancient and indigenous treatments and 'placing [her] faith completely in God' (p. 59). Tey Diana Rebolledo discusses this legendary figure in Chicano/a literature:

In general, the *curandera*/partera side is the positive side – a woman whose life is devoted to healing, curing, helping [...] the *curandera* emerges from a history and traditions of multiple cultures: the complex and intricate healing knowledge that the Arab culture had brought to Spain, the medieval Euro-Spanish healing traditions, and the Native American (both Mexican

⁹⁷ Castillo, 'A MELUS Interview with Elsa Sacta', pp. 146–47.

and southwestern) traditions of herb women, folk doctors who taught the Spanish arrivals their knowledge.⁹⁸

These attributes are reflected in the novel since Felicia not only practices old curative remedies but also helps Caridad to heal physically and spiritually. The text also reveals that the *curandera*'s healing practices deal with both the physical and mental aspect of the patient. Thus, Felicia gives advice on how to treat *empacho* (indigestion) but also on how to carry out a *limpia* (spiritual cleansing). When treating La Loca, the practices of Felicia complement those of the doctor, providing her with *limpias*. In her article 'Latinas and the Church', Ana María Díaz-Stevens traces the origins of this figure, explaining that in 'the rural outreaches of the mountains and plains of Latin America, distanced from clerical control, women, more often than men, assumed religious roles.'⁹⁹ Díaz-Stevens maintains that the midwife could also act as a *curandera*, and *rezadora* (leader of communal prayer), and as such

not even the occasional missionary visits from the priest would challenge or detract from her position of respect and influence in the community. [...] she could also claim the role of centralizer and counselor, often hearing more confessions and intimate details of the life of community than the priest. (p. 251)

This subversive aspect of the *curandera* is present in the novel, because the figure of the priest is almost absent. Father Jerome appears at the beginning of the novel when he heads the funeral of La Loca. But, when he doubts the benevolence of the resurrected child, 'Are you the devil's messenger or a winged angel?' (p. 23), Sofia 'screamed at [him], charging him and beating him with her fists. [...] "And *this* is a miracle, and answer to the prayers of a brokenhearted mother, ¡hombre necio, pendejo ...!"' (p. 23)¹⁰⁰ The priest's lack of empathy with Sofia exposes him as a

⁹⁸Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, p. 83.

⁹⁹ Ana María Díaz-Stevens, 'Latinas and the Church', in *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S.*, pp. 240-77 (p. 248).

¹⁰⁰ Gail Pérez argues that the insults articulated by Sofia, 'hombre necio, pendejo ...,' refer to a poem by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: ' "Hombres necios que acusáis / a la mujer sin razón/ sin ver que sois la ocasión/ de lo mismo que culpáis", [this poem] points out the frightful image of woman that men fear is itself a male construction.' (p. 74)

narrow-minded individual, and thus he rarely reappears in the novel. On the contrary, the curandera is a constant presence, helping and healing members of Sofia's family.

The characters of Sofia and the curandera not only embody the principles of popular Catholicism, described by Orlando O. Espín as 'people's own version of the religion'¹⁰¹, but also alternatives to the male Catholic figures. The contestatory nature of Latino Catholicism – 'primacy over clerically dominated and institutionally-based traditions like mass attendance and obedience to the clergy'¹⁰² – allows the inclusion of issues not traditionally present in religious customs. This is reflected in the re-enactment of the Holy Friday Procession at the end of the novel, which represents Castillo's call to combine political and social issues with religious practices. Sofia and La Loca join the ceremony on their own, since the rest of the family members have died. But this procession lacks the traditional elements that usually characterize such an event:

No brother was elected to carry a life-size cross on his naked back. There was no "Mary" to meet her son. Instead some like Sofi, who held a picture of la Fe as a bride, carried photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around the necks like scapulars; and at each station along their route, the crowd stopped and prayed and spoke on the so many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species. (pp. 241-42)

At each station of the cross, different issues of social justice are raised. Members of the community denounce the toxic contamination of the area and in the work place as well as the devastating effects of pesticide usage on the pickers. Later, a man provides information on the origin of AIDS and Sofia explains how her daughter Esperanza died in the Middle East.

So Far From God challenges the notion that religious representations and practices must remain unchanged in order to convey devotion to Catholicism. Similar to Chicana visual artists, Castillo pushes the boundaries that demarcate the subject matter of the religious discourse. Castillo, as well as those writers and artists that

¹⁰¹ 'Popular Catholicism among Latinos', p. 310.

¹⁰² Stevens-Arroyo, 'Latino Catholicism and the Eye of the Beholder', p. 31.

reconstruct the Virgin of Guadalupe, suggests that Catholic icons and practices should be revised and revamped in order to relate to the female devotee.

Under the Feet of Jesus: substituting male icons

Helena María Viramontes is another Chicana writer who discusses how religious discourse should be connected with issues of social justice. *Under the Feet of Jesus* follows the Chicano/a literary tradition that deals with farmworkers' hardships such as Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers* and Tomás Rivera's *...y no se tragó la tierra*. *Under the Feet of Jesus* describes the life of a family of migrant workers who experience poor living conditions in the fields of California.¹⁰³ The text focuses on the growing awareness and maturity of the thirteen-year old character Estrella who witnesses the injustices endured by her family and friend, Alejo. The novel concentrates on the moment in which Alejo is sprayed with pesticides by a biplane whilst working in the field. Seriously ill, he is nursed by Estrella's family before finally being taken to a clinic. There, an indifferent white nurse charges the family nine dollars, only to diagnose that he is very ill and that he needs to be taken to a hospital. Having been left with no money for petrol to go to the hospital, Estrella resorts to threats and violence to get her money back and thus enable her to drive Alejo to the hospital. The novel ends by presenting a mature Estrella. She is shown to have found an inner strength and confidence enabling her to become a leader with a 'heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed.' (p. 176) Although the novel abounds in dramatic episodes, it does not include the ironic and humorous distance that exists in *So Far from God*.

Religion is articulated as part of a wider web of elements such as poverty and racism that traps the farmworker in the socio-economic situation s/he is in. The novel

¹⁰³ Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Plume, 1996)

also reveals how two generations of women, Estrella and her mother Petra, understand the Catholic faith differently. Petra represents the devotee who has a blind faith in God and finds solace in praying to her saints. Her beliefs influence her to behave in an altruistic manner and take care of Alejo even though he is not a member of the family because 'she was a mother too, ... And of course, she did it for the love of God.' (p. 124) In a flashback recounting how Petra met her partner Perfecto in a supermarket, we are shown how this woman's naivety coupled with her strong devotion induce her to believe the garlic bulbs she is buying have been blessed by a nearby poster of the Virgin of Guadalupe:

- See? You can smell it in this one, the roses, see, and you don't believe me! Look, she said holding up the bulb, it's even blessed by La Virgen! but Estrella shrugged her shoulders not yet able to see the flowers in the bulb. ...

-They never believe you, the man said. (p. 112)

Her firm devoutness is also revealed in her maintenance of a home altar, an important element of her religious practice. Even though the family constantly moves around the country following the agricultural crops, the altar remains a constant element in their nomadic homes. As soon as they arrive at their new bungalow, a place is found for this religious space: 'Three crates in the corner would be a good place to set up Petra's altar with Jesucristo, La Virgen María y José.' (p. 8) The home altar is portrayed as a space where Petra can retreat for religious devotion and to find relief, exemplifying Kay Turner's argument that home altars 'represent a personal, private, and most importantly, a creative source of religious experience.'¹⁰⁴ But, Petra's religious space is also conferred with the safekeeping of important legal documents such as birth certificates and social security cards that prove their legal status in the country (p. 166). If stopped by the authorities, Petra tells her children not to run but 'to tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus.' (p. 63)

¹⁰⁴ Kay Turner, 'Mexican-American Home Altars: Towards Their Interpretation', *Aztlán*, 13 (1982), 309-26 (p. 309). See also her book on home altars from different cultures, *Beautiful Necessity. The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999)

The setting of these important documents in the altar reveals the significance attributed to them. The presence of these items in the altar evokes Kay Turner's work where she explains that 'the inclusion of anomalous objects on the altar makes a specific claim that altar making is not rule-bound.' (p. 321) At the altar, along with the statues and documents, Petra has also placed a doily 'crocheted by Petra's grandmother and given to her as a gift.' (p. 165) Through this object, Petra is able to relate her praying and endurance with another female member of her family: 'What thoughts had gone through her grandmother's mind as she crocheted, what threads looped and knotted and disguised themselves as prayers?' (p. 165) The amalgamation of diverse objects such as candles, icons, or family's items is a common characteristic of home altars as Kay Turner explains:

What the home altar visually contributes to the experience of the Mexican American life is a religiously based folk aesthetic of connectedness, referred to in folklore as the sense of family or community. [...]

Altar makers who, in a bricolage mode, combine a variety of images from diverse domains, both personal and universal, religious and secular, and creatively portray the networking principle as a religiously inspired ideal that can be individually interpreted within the bounds of the altar tradition. (p. 310)

The presence of disparate items such as a documents and family souvenirs not only positions the altar as something more than a religious space, but also as an individualistic and private area that allows the believer to inscribe her personal history. Petra's elaborate altar epitomizes William Beezley's argument that the items composing the altar 'all have individual meanings and together they have multiple and multilayered significance.'¹⁰⁵

In contrast to the passive and resigned character of Petra, Estrella embodies a rebellion against the suffering and social injustices suffered by her family. Estrella not only represents an alternative to Petra, but also to Perfecto, the family male

¹⁰⁵ William Beezley, 'Home altars, private reflections of public life', in *Home Altars of Mexico*, ed. by Ramón A. Gutiérrez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), pp. 91-107 (p. 100). Celeste Olalquiaga makes a similar point by describing the home altar as 'unique and unrepeatable, it is coded by the personal experience that composed it, and the code is unreadable to foreign eyes.' (p. 38)

figurehead. Enraged by the nurse's lack of professionalism and concern for Alejo, Estrella demands the money previously paid by threatening to attack her: 'Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor [...]' (p. 149) Estrella's violent actions result in the return of the money and thus the transport of Alejo to the hospital.¹⁰⁶ As the one who saves the situation, Estrella takes over the head of the family, Perfecto, who had simply witnessed the scene. This moment in the narrative marks her coming of age and a willingness to transform herself from a passive, compliant woman to an empowered one. Just after regaining the money from the nurse, we are told: 'She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money.' (p. 150) Her active and pragmatic character is also evidenced in the words she says to her mother at the beginning of the novel: 'No sense talking tough unless you do it.' (p. 45) As she shows at the end of the novel, she decides to stop talking (passive) and chooses to lead her family (active). After leaving Alejo at the hospital, the family returns home. Petra retreats to her altar and accidentally breaks the statue of Jesus Christ, who is portrayed as 'crushing a green serpent with bare feet.' (p. 165) Estrella, on the other hand, goes to the nearby barn where

The roof tilted downward and she felt gravity pulling but did not lose her footing. The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus, and a few pieces tumbled down over the edge of the barn. No longer did she stumble blindly. [...] Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed. (pp. 175-76)

The last pages of the novel articulate Estrella as an alternative leader to Jesus Christ. This religious figure is posited as obsolete after his statue is broken, whilst

¹⁰⁶ Even though Estrella does not hurt the nurse, the use of violence remains a problematic issue. The narrator seems to justify her actions: 'They make you that way, [Estrella] sighted with resignation. She tried to understand what happened herself. You talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of the sudden they listen real fast.' (p. 151)

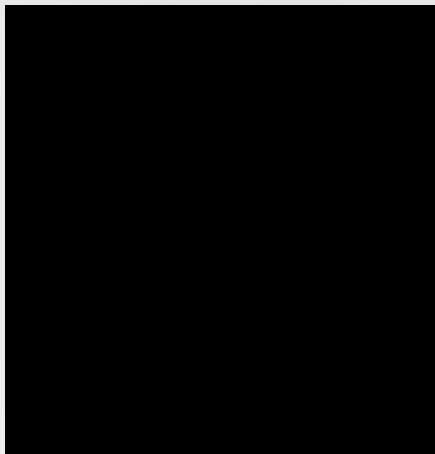
Estrella substitutes him as she also, symbolically, crushes the serpent under her feet.¹⁰⁷ Estrella is presented at the end of the novel as a new female role model and leader, strong enough to substitute Jesus and Perfecto. Ellen McCracken argues that 'Estrella reclaims the barn at the end as a symbol of her autonomy and strength, her rite of passage into adulthood, and the new forms of ethnic religiosity that women of her generation will employ.'¹⁰⁸ I believe the novel criticizes the messages of passivity and endurance implicit in the Catholic icons and calls for the emergence of empowering female role models that do not necessarily have to belong to the religious realm, such as Estrella. The name of the protagonist, 'Star', also supports this argument since the stars in the sky help to guide those who are lost. Estrella also represents an alternative female subjectivity to that of her mother, a resigned and passive character.

Catholicism is not the only realm that does not mirror realistic individuals and situations. Viramontes contends that the image of the farmworkers provided by marketing needs to be discussed alongside the issue of passive religious role models. The text compares Estrella picking grapes under the heat with the marketable image found in the packaging of raisins boxes:

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper. [...] The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins. (pp. 49-50)

¹⁰⁷ In the *Genesis* 3.15 God says to the serpent: 'And I will put enmity/Between you and the woman/And between your offspring and hers/He will crush your head/ And you will strike his heel'

¹⁰⁸ McCracken, *New Latina Narrative*, p. 183.



The text criticizes the unrealistic image that portrays the pickers as pleased with their situation and that hides the hardships and abuse they undergo in the fields. The text exposes that in the same way that the Catholic Church gives an unrealistic message to its devotees, the consumer world sells a fabricated story. This passage, as well as Alejo's poisoning by pesticides, is reminiscent of Ester Hernández's serigraph *Sun Mad* (1981) in which the image portrayed in the sun maid raisins boxes is subverted. The smiling woman is substituted by a skeleton and the serigraph reads: 'Sun Mad Raisins. Unnaturally Grown With Insecticides, Miticides, Herbicides, Fungicides'. Hernández explains that this serigraph is her response to the information that 'the water in my hometown, Dinuba, California, which is the center of the raisin-raising territory, had been contaminated by pesticides for 25 to 30 years.'¹⁰⁹ The serigraph also portrays the negative health effects on the picker and suggests that the consumer is also being poisoned. Like Viramontes, Hernández reproduces the unpleasant information not revealed to the consumer.

¹⁰⁹ Ester Hernández, quoted in Lippard's *Mixed Blessings*, p. 200. We must remember that Hernández has also worked with another mainstream image. In *Libertad* (1976) she re-imagines the Statue of Liberty, incorporating the indigenous heritage of Chicanos.

Under the Feet of Jesus and ... y no se lo tragó la tierra

As discussed in the first chapter, many Chicana writers feel the need to portray an alternative perspective to the male Chicano narrative that was produced during the 1970s and 1980s. Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* can thus be seen as a response to Tomás Rivera's bilingual novel ...y no se lo tragó la tierra/ ...And Earth did not part (1971) where the lives of working-class Chicanos/as, among them farmworkers, are narrated from a boy's point of view. As with much of the literature written at the time, the female characters are depicted in stereotypical and simplistic manners. This is the argument put forward by Francisca Rascón who claims that, in Rivera's novel, the female characters are mainly described as individuals who are resigned to their situation and fail to achieve their goals:

[...] cuando la mujer asume un rol activo su función es negativa y las consecuencias son trágicas, especialmente para el hombre de acuerdo con la narración. Cuando la mujer es presentada como abnegada, considerada, religiosa y como madre su esfuerzo de acción lleva al fracaso.¹¹⁰

Under the Feet of Jesus's protagonist provides an alternative to these female representations by portraying an empowered and independent personality that takes on an active role. Rather than being a secondary character as women are in ...y no se lo tragó la tierra, Estrella assumes the main (and rescuer) role traditionally ascribed to men.

These two Chicano/a novels can also be compared through the ways in which the main character questions his/her family's religion and challenges the assumption that belief in God relieves the suffering of his/her people. In the section from Rivera's text that has the same title as the book, the young protagonist becomes increasingly aware of the suffering and illnesses affecting his family, and realises

¹¹⁰ Francisca Rascón, 'La caracterización de los personajes femeninos en "... y no se lo tragó la tierra", in *Contemporary Chicano Fiction. A Critical Survey*, ed. by Vernon E. Lattin (New York: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1986), pp. 141-48 (p. 146). 'when the woman assumes an active role, her action is negative and the consequences are tragic, especially for the man in the narrative. When the woman is presented as a self-sacrificing, respected, religious individual and as a mother, her effort leads to failure.'

what the future holds. When his father becomes ill and he sees his mother relying on religion, he protests:

"What do you gain by doing that, mother? Don't tell me that you believe that sort of thing helped my uncle and my aunt? Why is it that we are here on earth as though buried alive? ... God doesn't even remember us... There must not be a God... No, better not say it, [...]"¹¹¹

The following day, after being asked by his mother to calm down he replies that 'God, I am sure doesn't give a damn about us.' (p. 76) Later on whilst working in the fields, his brother gets sunstroke and the protagonist, frustrated, says 'what he had been wanting to say for a long time. He cursed God.' (p. 78) Despite her mother's warning that the earth will 'open up and devour you for talking like that' (p. 76), nothing happens. Defying his family's religious beliefs endows him with a sense of empowerment since then 'he felt capable of doing and undoing whatever he chose' (p. 79). Breaking away from a series of beliefs and superstitions passed on to him allows him to find agency rather than resign himself to bear the circumstances as his mother does.

Rivera's main character is reminiscent of Viramontes' female protagonist, who after a series of misfortunes, rejects the idea that religion will bring her relief. Rivera's protagonist's words are echoed by Estrella's thoughts. Disturbed by the lack of attention given to the ill Alejo, Estrella tries to hide her emotions: 'she did not want to think what she was thinking now: God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself.' (p. 139) In both cases, questioning and undermining God's power enables both characters to take control of their lives. Though Viramontes goes a step further by imagining her character as a new possible leader. As with Castillo's novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* makes use of the religious discourse to inscribe an empowering feminist subjectivity.

¹¹¹ Tomás Rivera, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And Earth did not part* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971), pp. 75-6.

Refusing to be a passive devotee in Chicana writing and altar art

Once again, the ideology presented in Chicana literature finds resonance in visual art. This time, Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains presents an installation where a religious space is subverted by the incorporation of a secular icon. The installation entitled *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río* (1984, reconstructed 1990) presents a luxurious and embellished home altar dedicated to the Mexican actress Dolores del Río. Mesa-Bains forms a part of a group of Chicano artists who have revitalized the art form of altar making in the past years. Elizabeth López maintains that altar making is a 'tradition that was revived by Chicano artists and reintroduced within Chicano communities who had long since abandoned such practices.'¹¹² The relevance of this art form and popularity amongst Chicana artists is revealed in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* where altars by Ester Hernández, Delilah Montoya or Celia Rodríguez are presented. In these works figures such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, a prisoner and Princess Diana are honoured and resacrilized by the artists. According to López, altar-inspired works are embedded in the past where memory plays an important role in the survival of one's identity.' (p. 15) This purpose is replicated in Mesa-Bains's installation where the remembrance of an important icon of the Mexican film industry is the focus of her domestic altar.

This installation presents the traditional elements found in home altars: flowers, photographs, personal objects, religious icons, candles, although items that stress the icon's life intermingle with these. Objects referring to the actress's glamorous lifestyle – Eiffel tower, reels – accompany those that stress her femininity – lipstick, fan –.

¹¹² Elizabeth López, 'Cultural Syncretism and Altar-Inspired Artwork', in *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art*, ed. by Constance Cortez (Massachusetts: Tufts University Gallery, 1999), pp. 11-19 (p. 16).

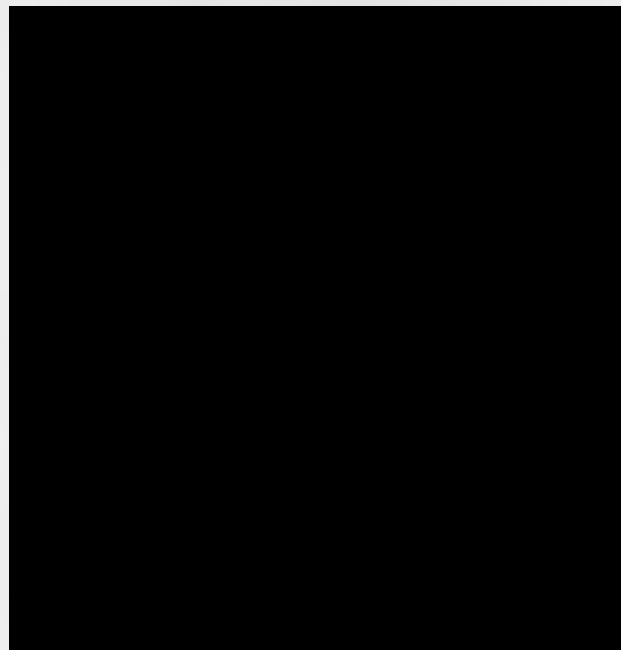
In her book, *Beautiful Necessity. The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*, Kay Turner explains that the practice of home altars can be traced to the pre-Christian era and that it has been traditionally practiced by women as a way to comprehend the Divine. Altars habitually convey 'the desire for fertility and fruitfulness. They have been sites of special identification with earth-derived (feminine archetypal) powers.'¹¹³ Unrecognised by the Catholic Church, this practice 'is one of many folk-religious traditions that over centuries have been of benefit to women excluded from full-participation in male-dominated religions.'¹¹⁴ The presence of icons in the altar suggests that women can 'appeal to images without intervention from the Church hierarchy' (p. 17). Home altar making is a practice very much maintained in the Chicano/a community, epitomizing the ideology of Latino/a Catholicism: whilst it endorses the believer's religious beliefs, it also allows a distancing from the official Church. The artist Mesa-Bains takes advantage of the subversive and private aspects of home altars and introduces a secular icon in a space reserved for a sacred one. Practices similar to the home altars elaborated by Mesa-Bains are labelled by the latter *domesticana*, 'techniques of subversion through play with traditional imagery and cultural material.'¹¹⁵ Mesa-Bains reflects this ideology in her installation by making use of a traditional practice but including an icon that doesn't belong to the religious realm but to the film industry.

The selection of the actress Dolores del Rio by a Chicana artist is not coincidental. Del Rio first became famous in Hollywood in the 1920s, representing the Latino/a exotic 'other'. In 1943, she returned to Mexico to continue a productive career in Mexican cinema with films such as *Maria Candelaria* or *Las Abandonadas*.

¹¹³ Turner, 'Mexican Home Altars: Towards Their Interpretation', p. 320.

¹¹⁴ *Beautiful Necessity*, p. 22.

¹¹⁵ Amalia Mesa-Bains, 'The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache', *Aztlán*, 24:2 (1999), 157-67 (p. 161).



According to Carlos Monsiváis, her enormous success is down to 'the perfect embodiment of a Society Lady, and second, because of her delirious succession of roles as the devastated and oppressed Long-Suffering Woman [...].'¹¹⁶ In the statements accompanying the altar installation, Mesa-Bains explains the significance of this actress:

Dolores symbolized a beauty that transcended carnal reality. Despite her depiction as an "exotic beauty" in the Hollywood films of the 20's and 30's, the radiance of her *belleza* (beauty) eclipsed the trivial celluloid situations. [...] In her roles in the Mexican Cinema, she reflected the heroic history of the country.

With a career in both the American and Mexican cinema, Dolores symbolized a universal yet particular Mexican beauty to a generation of Chicanos. In her position as an accepted beauty in

¹¹⁶ Carlos Monsiváis, 'Dolores de Río: The Face as Institution', in *Mexican Postcards* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 71-87 (p. 81) Mesa Bains locates the ideology of *domesticana* within the Chicano artistic movement of *rasquachismo*, a tendency to combine popular culture with cultural affirmation which is usually compared with kitsch.

The positioning of Dolores del Río as a new role model or icon is an ironic act if we take into account the role that the actress played in the film where the central picture is taken from. In the film, *María Candelaria* (1944), Del Río played a woman who is stoned to death because of a misunderstanding. According to Charles Ramírez Berg, the actress represented 'a woman so pure, so good that she combines the virginal characteristics of both virgin and Virgin.' In *Cinema of Solitude. A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967 - 1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 58. The irony of substituting the altar's traditional Virgin with a symbolic Virgin implies that women cannot escape being subjected to unattainable role models.

both cultures, Dolores gave meaning and power to a generation of Chicanos suffering rejection because of the accepted Anglo standard of beauty.¹¹⁷

For Mesa-Bains, Del Rio represents far more than an attractive Mexican actress, but an empowering sense of Mexican identity. The substitution of a saintly icon by the actress Del Rio suggests that the (female Chicana) home altar maker finds it easier to relate to or connect with the human icon than with the holy one.¹¹⁸ Commenting on this altar, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto argues that 'the underlying aim being to shift perception of Dolores del Rio from being merely a fashionable commodity to her recognition as a woman of significant accomplishment [...]'.¹¹⁹ Similar to *So Far from God*, by setting the actress in a space traditionally reserved for veneration, the artist implies that del Rio deserves to be remembered by the Chicano/a population since her life is connected to the Chicano/a experience.¹²⁰ Also, by bringing an element which is usually confined in a domestic and private area into a public space, the artist allows the spectator to be a voyeur by sneaking into a women's bedroom. Mesa-Bains disappoints the viewer's expectations by revealing that the icon venerated is not a saintly figure but sexy Dolores del Rio. The installation suggests to the spectator that this subversive act could be taking place in many Chicanos/as homes, but because of the hidden location of the altar, s/he will never be able to find out.

Along with Castillo and Viramontes, Mesa-Bains makes use of religious practices and symbols to inscribe a feminist agenda. These literary and visual artists

¹¹⁷ Amalia Mesa-Bains, 'Artist Statement', in *Ofrendas*. Catalogue of exhibition held at Galeria Posada, Sacramento, October 7 – November 17, 1984.

¹¹⁸ Even though, in this context, Dolores del Rio embodies an empowering female subjectivity, her positioning as role model is itself a problematic move. The beauty and perfection represented by the actress are unattainable and unrealistic features as the virtues symbolized by Virgin Mary.

¹¹⁹ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 'Sanctums of the Spirit – The Altares of Amalia Mesa-Bains', in *Grotto of the Virgins. Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains*. pp. 2-9, (p. 9).

¹²⁰ Mesa-Bains has also created altars that commemorate other important female figures of Mexican origin such as Frida Kahlo and Rita Cansino Hayworth. The art of home altars is popular among Chicano/a artists: Rene Yañez, Carmen Lozas Garza or Armando Cid have also created home altar installations that venerate important Mexican figures such as Frida Kahlo or Jose Guadalupe Posada. See *Ofrendas*, Catalogue of exhibition held at Galeria Posada, Sacramento, October 7 – November 17, 1984.

represent a generation of Chicanas who invest the religious domain with a new empowering capacity and who are attempting to move away from the image of Chicanas as passive receivers of religious beliefs. This idea is expressed in Cisneros's (previously discussed) story 'Little Miracles, Kept Promises' where the disclosure of the texts accompanying the *exvotos* challenge the notion of Chicanas as compliant devotees. In a letter, Ms. Barbara Ybáñez asks San Antonio de Padua – usually invoked to find a partner and lost items – for a 'man who isn't a pain in the nalgas' (p. 117), she continues:

Not one who's never lived alone, never brought his own underwear, never ironed his own shirts, never heated his own tortillas. In other words, don't send me someone like my brothers who my mother ruined with too much chichi, or I'll throw him back. I'll turn your statue upside down until you send him to me. I've put up with too much too long [...] (pp. 117-18)

This passage portrays a female devotee who, despite relying on her religious beliefs for the granting of a partner, is not willing to tolerate a man who does not respect her. By threatening the saint to keep his statue upside down until the request is granted, Cisneros portrays a female devotee whose sense of empowerment and agency has an effect on the religious arena. In another letter directed to 'La Santísima de San Juan de los Lagos' Teresa Galindo states that she has been granted her request and has found 'a guy who love[s] me' (p. 122). But this time she asks 'to lift this heavy cross from my shoulders and leave me like I was before, wind on my neck, my arms swinging free, and no one telling me how I ought to be.' (p. 122) The disclosure of these private texts challenges the notion of Chicanas as passive readers of the religious discourse. In another text addressed to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Rosario de Leon offers a braid of hair¹²¹ in order to thank the Virgin among other things, 'for making all those months I held my breath not a child in my belly, but a thyroid problem in my throat. I can't be a mother. Not now. Maybe never.' (p. 127) In this passage, Cisneros exposes the ways in which the religious discourse can become

¹²¹ Carmen de Montserrat Robledo Galván argues that *exvotos* can be divided in two categories: artistic ones such as *retablos* and sculptures and non-artistic ones such as flowers, radiographies or hair. See 'Exvotos', in *Visiones de Guadalupe. Artes de México* 29, 58-59 (p. 58).

intertwined with gender issues. The writer discloses the irony inherent in the fact that a devotee requests from an icon representing motherhood *not* to become a mother. This passage reinforces the idea expressed previously that the Virgin of Guadalupe is interpreted very differently by diverse members of the Chicano/a population.

The writers and artists herein discussed demonstrate that devotion is compatible with female agency and empowerment. Either by reclaiming the indigenous deities from which Catholic icons descend, or by re-inventing saintly figures, these Chicanas re-configure the religious discourse by bringing in socio-political concerns. The discussion of these textual and visual representations also reveals how a new generation of Chicanas are challenging the notion that to be authentically devoted to Catholicism, one has to follow the mandates of the Church or venerate the unchanged image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Chicanas also demonstrate that one can be devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but not be Catholic.

The extent to which devotees are willing to be *authentic* in order to demonstrate their devotion to the community is exemplified in a satirical short story by Mexican María Amparo Escandón entitled 'Reenactment on Via Dolorosa'.¹²² A mother recounts the pride she felt by seeing her son Refugio reincarnating Christ on Good Friday. But, the re-enactment of the Passion of Christ conveys the carrying of the cross, whipping, and being nailed to it. This test of authenticity becomes too brutal for Refugio, who faints and has to be taken away by ambulance. Escandón pokes fun at the idea that true devotion is measured by the capacity to imitate religious icons. Contrasting this view, Chicana artists and writers express that the ways they interpret Catholicism is as acceptable as other groups and generations have previously done. Their work also places emphasis on the necessity to revitalize Catholicism. They suggest that the only way they can embrace Catholicism is by re-

¹²² María Amparo Escandón, 'Reenactment on Via Dolorosa', *Hopscotch*, 1:2 (1999), 86-89. I would like to thank Ilan Stavans for recommending this short text and suggesting ideas.

orientating it towards an ideology that takes into consideration social issues affecting coloured women.

In an article discussing Chicano/a cultural production, Elena Poniatowska claims that Chicanas have to be acknowledged for their courage to question and reconfigure the religious canon. Praising the work of Chicanas who have remoulded the Virgin of Guadalupe, the writer argues that a Mexican artist could never have created those literary and artistic pieces in Mexico because 'Breaking religious canons is breaking cultural canons. And political ones.'¹²³ She continues: 'Mexican women are so profoundly marked by religion, the weight of religion is so paralysing, that the Chicana's absolute will for self-respect and self-assertiveness would be hard for us to accept [...]' (p. 49) Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues a similar point by writing that 'Chicanos were able to reinvent and activate the icon of *la Guadalupe* in a way that would be unthinkable in Mexico.'¹²⁴ Chicanas not only *dare* to re-articulate the Virgin of Guadalupe but also other Catholic symbols and spaces. The writers and artists herein examined show new paths for religious re-articulations by revealing that Catholicism can *and* should interact with gendered and socio-political issues.

¹²³ Poniatowska, 'Mexicanas and Chicanas', p. 48.

¹²⁴ Gómez-Peña, 'The Two Guadalupes', p. 181.

Chapter 3: Chicanas Rewriting Children's Tales

'Despite the stabilizing power of print, fairy tales can still be told and retold so that they challenge and resist, rather than simply reproduce, the constructs of a culture.'¹

Symbols and themes from fairy tales and folk tales abound in the pages of Chicano/a literature. Although in some texts, a Chicano/a writer may only make a short reference to a fairy tale character or situation, in many other cases allusions to children's stories open up a space for cultural and feminist analysis. In the past years, Chicana writers and critics have revealed a great interest in the folk figure of La Llorona, the weeping woman. La Llorona has a didactic role in the upbringing of children, as a bogeywoman figure. But, she also has a more significant function as a cultural anti-role model for Chicanas. Like the other two Mexican female role models, the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche, Chicana writers revise the figure of La Llorona, divesting it of its patriarchal dimension and articulating it as a many-faceted icon, with roots in pre-Columbian times.

Representations of the magical and wonder are not only bound to the Mexican cultural heritage. Themes and narratives from mainstream children's tales are also present in Chicana writing, suggesting that these themes and symbols also influence Chicanos/as. My aim is to investigate the ways in which canonical tales are re-articulated in order to discuss gendered and socio-political concerns. The figure of the bogeyman is given much attention as it allows Chicana writers to address the real individuals that threaten Chicanas in contemporary society.

The discourse of the fairy tale has been extensively researched, bringing attention to the origins of the fairy tale in oral traditions and to the previous variations existing before its popularisation. An important critic of this field is Bruno Bettelheim, who assigns fairy tales an important role in the development of

¹ Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 236-37.

children's personalities. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales are not only 'works of art' but more significantly, they 'make [...] great and positive psychological contributions to the child's inner growth.'² Among these accomplishments is 'the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him.' (p. 11) But the genre of fairy tale has also undergone an important revision, highlighting the sexual politics and power relations hidden behind the supposedly benevolent and innocent stories. Critics such as Jack Zipes and Marina Warner draw attention to the ways in which fairy tales transmit prejudiced notions about class and gender roles. Warner for instance points out that Cinderella's tale is considered by feminists an 'oppressor's script for female domestication.'³ In her article 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', Karen Rowe expounds on the messages of passivity conveyed to women:

Romantic tales thus transmit clear warnings to rebellious females: resistance to the cultural imperative to wed constitutes so severe a threat to the social fabric that they will be compelled to submit. Likewise, tales morally censure bad fairies and vain, villainous stepmothers who exhibit manipulative power or cleverness.⁴

This feminist approach will be expressed in the articulations of the tales Rapunzel and La Llorona, where Chicana writers subvert the traditional gendered roles and present the female character as the rescuer. This task has also been undertaken by writers such as Angela Carter and Luisa Valenzuela, who revised classical fairy tales (such as Bluebeard) from a feminist point of view, altering the sexual politics of the tales.⁵

² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 12.

³ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde. On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. xiv.

⁴ Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', *Women's Studies*, 6.3 (1979), 230-55 (p. 247).

⁵ For a general discussion on contemporary literary texts that revise classical fairy tales refer to Cristina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales. Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). See also, Lucie Armitt, 'The Fragile Frames of *The Bloody Chamber*', in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter. Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London and New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 88-99; Sharon Magnarelli, 'Simetrias "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall..."', *World Literature Today*, 69.4 (1995); 717-25; Jack Zipes, ed. *Don't Bet on the Prince. Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (Hants: Gower, 1986)

Critics have also brought to light old variants that preceded the contemporary printed-versions of classical tales. In this way, the notion of canonical or unique tale is posited as obsolete, and the role of the storyteller is underlined. This is the argument of Marina Warner, who states that 'Who tells the story, who recasts the characters and changes the tone becomes very important: no story is ever the same as its source or model, the chemistry of narrator and audience changes it.'⁶ The idea of a multidimensional tale becomes evident in Chicana retellings, as their revised versions of La Llorona or Little Red Riding Hood are posited as valid and authentic as the canonical account. Thus, Chicanas prioritise the figure of the narrator, asserting their right to re-write canonical and folk tales to suit their feminist ideology.

Alicia in Wonder Tierra: the problematic of imagining Oz/Mexico

The two-act play *Alicia in Wonder Tierra or I can't eat goat head* forms part of the little known work of Chicana Silvia González.⁷ 'Loosely based'⁸ on *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, the play narrates the magical journey undertaken by the teenager Alicia through Wonder Tierra. Through a rewriting of these two tales, the text reveals the conflicts confronted by second generation Chicano/a teenagers who have assimilated into the United States whilst the parents, Mexican immigrants, are frustrated at their children's denial of their roots.⁹

Set in a Mexican curio shop somewhere in the United States, the text presents a moody teenager who wants to go to the 'mall' whilst her mother is trying to make her appreciate the Mexican ornaments sold in the shop. While her mother is deciding

⁶ *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 418.

⁷ Silvia González S., *Alicia in Wonder Tierra (or I Can't Eat Goat Head)* (Woodstock: Dramatic Publishing, 1996). The text states that the play 'was produced at the Coterie Theatre as part of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest New Works for Young Audiences Program, October 10-November 5, 1995 in Kansas City, Missouri [...]' No page number

⁸ Cover, no page number.

⁹ I would like to thank Silvia González for providing me with unpublished manuscripts of her plays and helping me to fully understand this play.

what to buy, Alicia trips over some Mexican pottery trying to reach a doll. The doll becomes a woman and disappears under a blanket. Alicia follows her and enters Wonder Tierra, a fantasy world that represents Mexican history and culture. Throughout her journey, Alicia becomes familiar with personalities and objects from Mexican popular culture and history such as a sugar skull, Pancho Villa or an Aztec priest. But her journey of awareness is threatened by the presence of the Elvira gang, a group of Latina girls who want to eradicate any Mexican trait from Alicia. After the successful passing of some tests and the destruction of the Elvira gang, Alicia is capable of returning to the real world. It turns out that she had become unconscious after her fall in the shop and that her journey had simply been a dream. Also, the doll called Rosa that Alicia had been chasing throughout her journey is in reality her own mother. After her magical trip, Alicia reveals that 'I always knew [who I was], but I never really wanted to acknowledge it' (p. 67). At the end, Alicia and her mother buy some Mexican ornaments and head home.

Even though the play states that the text is 'loosely based on Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" (with a touch of "The Wizard of Oz")', I believe the narrative draws more consistently from the latter. The purpose of Alicia's journey is the embrace of her Mexican origins, in other words, of her *home*, a central notion in *The Wizard of Oz*. Why does González choose these two specific tales to address a Chicana teenager's coming to terms with her cultural identity? One of the reasons for selecting Carroll's text as her foundation seems grounded in the fact that Alice's journey involves encountering unusual and strange-looking characters and situations. González maintains this aspect of the original tale in her reconstructed text, since Alicia reacts similarly when she comes across *strange* characters and objects from Mexican culture. Hence, Alicia considers the Aztec priest and the sugar skull to be bewildering in the same way that Alice judges the talking caterpillar or the mad tea-

party bizarre. The reactions of Alicia allow the playwright to signal Alicia's degree of assimilation and her lack of interest in Mexican culture.

Carolyn Sigler argues that both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are interpreted as 'portrayals of the experience of growing up and the construction of agency and identity.'¹⁰ The physical changes undergone by Alice throughout her journey make her 'mutable, in a constant process of becoming' (p. xiv). But Susan Sherer maintains that even though Alice's fall in the rabbit-hole 'represents a child's metaphorical progress through the birth canal and [...] this [...] symbolizes some kind of rite of passage, a movement towards some deeper knowledge', there is a '*lack of internal development*.'¹¹ (my italics) On the contrary, in González's re-writing, the protagonist demonstrates an internal transition by maturing and welcoming her cultural background. The Chicana author incorporates *The Wizard of Oz* narrative into her play because this will allow her to signal a change in Alicia's development. In his analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*,¹² Paul Nathanson claims that at the end of her trip, Dorothy 'has a new perception of herself – that is, of her self.'¹³ Although González's story line is based on Carroll's canonical text, the themes of origins and home, so significant in the play, are obtained from Frank Baum's tale. Dorothy's journey through Oz and the test embodied in the killing of the witch, indicate a change in her perception of her home and family, in the same way that Alicia's adventure and the annihilation of the Elvira gang enable her to accept her culture. Dorothy's and her friends' journey allows them to realize that they already possessed what they were looking for. Dorothy's memorable words about the worth of family and friends '[...] if I ever go looking for

¹⁰ Carolyn Sigler, 'Introduction', in *Alternatives Alices. Visions and Revisions of Lewis Carroll's Alice Books*, ed. by Carolyn Sigler (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), pp. xi-xxiii (p. xiv).

¹¹ Susan Sherer, 'Secrecy and Autonomy in Lewis Carroll', *Philosophy and Literature*, 20.1 (1996), 1-19 (pp. 1-2).

¹² Whenever I mention *The Wizard of Oz*, I refer to the filmic version, as this is the most popular form.

¹³ Paul Nathanson, *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 93.

my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with!'¹⁴ is re-articulated in *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* as: 'I always knew [who I am], but never really wanted to acknowledge it.' (p. 67) The idea of translating and *mexicanizing* two canonical texts is crucial for the understanding of the play. González re-writes two classical narratives, imagining the protagonist as a Chicana teenager in a Mexican environment. As Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere argue 'Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way.'¹⁵ Since González's play is, in a sense, a *translation*, she not only *mexicanizes* the tales' characters and environment but introduces different dilemmas and identity issues into the protagonist's search for identity.¹⁶ González takes into consideration in her *translation* that a second-generation immigrant teenager confronts particular issues and problems, such as the pressure to assimilate. Let us analyse how the Chicana playwright *translates The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

Right after the entrance into Wonder Tierra, Alicia encounters an object that strikes her as peculiar, a (talking) sugar skull:

SUGAR SKULL. *A donde vas?* Don't be afraid

ALICIA. You are a skull.

SUGAR SKULL. Made of sugar. I'm not real. I represent the Day of the Dead. I could be a gift to someone. [...] Haven't you received a sugar skull from anyone?

ALICIA. No. Never.

SUGAR SKULL (*exaggerated inhale*). That's shocking. [...] Never? Such things! This is a tradition here in Mexico. (pp. 9-10)

The space that Alicia has just entered is not simply a parallel fantasy world but a representation of Mexico. Her unfamiliarity with the popular sugar skull signals her

¹⁴ Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf, *The Wizard of Oz* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 128.

¹⁵ Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, 'Preface', in *Translation, History and Culture*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere (London: Pinter, 1995), p. ix.

¹⁶ *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* is not the only play that *Mexicanizes* or *Latinizes* canonical texts. Her (unpublished) play *Blanca Nieves and the Seven Boys* rewrites the fairy tale 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' by setting the action in Venezuela and transforming characters such as the witch into a *curandera*.

lack of contact with Mexican culture. Although she admits that her parents 'may have gotten one when they were young', she dismisses the sugar skull as 'a curiosity [...] passed around as a very strange, yet folk-tale-like, object.' (p. 10) Previously in the shop, she had expressed her lack of interest for the Mexican articles and described them as 'useless stuff.' (p. 8)

The next character Alicia finds is an armadilla who speaks with a Texan accent and stares at the sun with her eyes wide open as she likes the sight of the colourful spots produced by the gaze. When Alicia tells her that she can also see the spots, the armadilla replies: 'People who are confused, see those spots.' (p. 12) This statement suggests that Alicia may be finding it hard to come to terms with her identity, especially when we consider that she is a teenager. Their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of the Elvira gang, a group that represents Oz's Witch of the West as well as the expected wicked character in children's tales. As soon as they see Alicia, the four Elvirs attempt to categorise her:

ELVIRA #1. Hey, check out the coconut!
 ELVIRA #2. She's a wetback!
 ELVIRA #3. She's a *gringa*!
 ELVIRA #4. She's a Mexican-American!
 ELVIRA #2. No. We say *Latina*!
 ELVIRA #3. She's a Chicana!!
 ELVIRA #4. She's a *pocha*. [...]
 ELVIRA #1. Are you going around calling yourself a Hispanic?
 ELVIRA #2. We don't like that word.
 ELVIRA #3. We don't like *Chicana* either.
 ELVIRA #4. The term is over.
 ALICIA. I don't say anything. (p. 13)

The endeavour to label Alicia is reminiscent of Alice's experiences in Wonderland where her identity is constantly mistaken. The White Rabbit thinks she is Mary Ann, his housemaid.¹⁷ Later on, the Pigeon is convinced she is a serpent: 'You're a serpent; there's no use denying it.' (p. 47) Alicia's reply to the Elvirs is similar to the one given by Alice to the Caterpillar when asked who she is: 'I-I

¹⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (London: J.M. Dent, 1978), pp. 25-26.

hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning [...].’ (p. 36) The list of names referring to an individual of Latin American origin reveals that each ‘label’ connotes a certain socio-political and economic status. In her article on the identity problems confronted by Hispanic children, Patricia Fernández-Kelly states: ‘Embracing or resisting ethnic nomenclatures reflects how people view themselves and believe are viewed by others. The acceptance of terms used to denote impoverished or despised groups can impose a heavy toll upon immigrant children.’¹⁸ Whilst the term ‘Hispanic’, as Suzanne Oboler argues, is a homogenizing ‘artifact created and imposed by state administrative agencies’¹⁹, ‘Latino’ has more progressive connotations. The fact that Alicia replies ‘I don’t say anything’ to their question about labels implies that she has never had to define herself with respect to her ethnic identity. Even though in Wonderland Alice voices her uncertainty over her identity more continuously than Alicia, the latter’s pursuit of Rosa (her mother) symbolizes her endeavour to find an identity.

The Elvira gang’s threat throughout the play lies in the fact that they do not want Alicia to find her roots. They want to ‘make her into one of us [...] after we strip her of all identity [...] like it was done to us.’ (p. 36) The Elvira gang embody United States’ assimilation and its endeavour to annihilate cultural differences. All the gang members have the same name, Elvira, reinforcing the idea that they represent assimilation and homogenisation. It is significant that the characters are warned of the proximity of the gang by a strong smell of mascara and hair spray. The excessive

¹⁸ Patricia Fernández-Kelly, ‘From Estrangement to Affinity: Dilemmas of Identity Among Hispanic Children’, in *Borderless Borders: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans, and the Paradox of Interdependence*, ed. by Frank Bonilla and others (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 83–104 (p. 83).

¹⁹ Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, p. xv. In this book, Oboler discusses the word ‘Hispanic’ and its limitations in describing the population of Latin American descent residing in the United States: ‘The term ignores, for example, the distinct and diverse experiences of descendants of U.S. conquest, such as the Chicanos, and those of the Puerto Rican populations, colonized by the United States at the turn of the century. [...] In so doing, longtime native-born U.S. citizens and residents are combined with more recently arrived economic immigrants who may have crossed the U.S. border yesterday.’ (p. 1)

use of these accessories becomes an allegory for the Elviras' *inauthenticity* since they are attempting to mask their ethnic looks.²⁰

In her search for the Aztec temple, Alicia, accompanied by the puppet Ramón, enters the Distorted Memory Forest, where 'memory becomes real, but in a stranger way.' (p. 20) There, Alicia remembers events from her childhood that involved playing with a horny toad and eating the Mexican dish goat head. Recalling when she and her brother played with a horny toad, she mentions that she mispronounced 'toad' since 'Our English wasn't that good then.' (p. 18) This suggests that Alicia and her family in the past used to live in Mexico or in a Spanish-speaking environment. The Distorted Memory Forest enables her to remember aspects and events from her early days that had been suppressed in her unconscious. By remembering her childhood, Alicia realizes that she once spoke Spanish and was immersed in Mexican culture. According to C.G. Jung, the appearance of the child motif in myths and dreams is an indication of self-realization and individualization:

One of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is potential future. Hence the occurrence of the child motif in the psychology of the individual signifies as a rule an anticipation of future developments, even though at first sight it may seem like a retrospective configuration. [...] It is therefore not surprising that so many of the mythological saviours are child gods. This agrees exactly with our experience of the psychology of the individual, which shows that the "child" paves the way for a future change of personality.²¹

Alicia's confrontation with her past, i.e., childhood, indicates a willingness to come to terms with her identity and to embrace her roots. This is the first time in the narrative where the protagonist recollects some aspects of her life that she had repressed. After leaving the forest, Alicia and Ramón encounter a tree full of talking heads. The heads represent Latino icons and celebrities such as a mambo king, Pancho Villa, Charo (singer), a Hispanic yuppie and a pachuco, leading Ramón to

²⁰ Stage directions state that the Elviras' 'faces are painted like Elvira, the Empress of the Night on TV, and their bodies are of gang-bangers.' (p. 13) The character on which the gang members are based belongs to a B-rated horror film. In an e-mail letter, Silvia González has explained that the Elviras are based on some *cholas* (gang members) she remembered from her childhood. They scared her since they were troublesome and it was rumoured they had razor blades inside their teased hair in case they got in a fight and their hair was pulled. González believes that since they were neither Mexican nor American (*pochas*), they created their own look and behaviour.

²¹ C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 164.

describe the tree as a 'stereotype scrambler' (p. 22). The heads tell her that they represent 'her thoughts, [...] memories, [...] hope [...] and disappointment' (p. 25) suggesting that they embody Alicia's fragmented vision of her culture. Advised by the trees to walk around the tree three times in order to 'see the truth' (p. 25), Alicia does so and again begins to remember events from her past. This time, she recollects a colourful desert: 'the grass has turned brown and the sand has turned yellow. [...] I saw Mexican souls walking far in the desert. Or are they from Peru, or El Salvador? Headed to the farms looking for work.' (p. 26) Since 'the tree is making her aware' (p. 26) and thus making her confront repressed knowledge, the reference to immigrants may allude to her own parents who may have crossed the border in search of work.

Later, the Elviras capture Rosa and tie her to the tree, so that when Alicia tries to free her, they will seize her and 'make her into one of us.' (p. 36) In order to save Rosa and herself, Alicia and Ramón must find the Aztec priest and pottery maker. When they finally locate the Aztec priest – another representative of Mexican history – he instructs them in Aztec practices such as sacrifices. This character is presented as a cruel and egocentric individual who is eager to find good-looking people to sacrifice. The Aztec priest explains the purpose behind such rituals: 'We must placate the gods, or else [...] some disaster will befall us. Like ... bad weather.' (p. 44) He finally lets them know the direction they ought to take and eventually find themselves in a room full of pottery and souls. The souls agree to tell them where the pottery maker is if she answers some riddles:

ALL SOULS. What is always better when it is broken? [...]

RAMON. That's a hard one.

ALICIA. Oh, that's easy. A *piñata*.

RAMON. *¡Que bien!*

ALL SOULS. How did you know?

ALICIA. That was easy.

SOUL #1. It's our best riddle. No one gets that one.

ALICIA. I guess the answer came to me because I went into that Mexican curio shop. It really was beautiful, though at first I was embarrassed to be there. My mother knows all about those

things in the store, but I don't. There's so much to know. I see the tradition, but from afar. It's not mine, but it is. I'm expected to know the meaning of everything because of who I am, but I don't know. I have to look it up like everyone else. (*Silence*)

ALL SOULS and RAMON. *Que lastima.*

SOUL #1. All right. She can go see the pottery maker. (pp. 47-48)

This passage suggests that Alicia is beginning to embrace the identity she had always rejected. The passing of the test guarantees her continuation in Wonder Tierra and thus the opportunity to go on learning about her culture. Next, Alicia and Ramón find a dinner table set up for *menudo*, Mexican tripe soup. The participants of this dinner are the sugar skull, the goat head, a flamenco dancer, and a ventriloquist with a dummy that characterises Rosarita (the woman appearing in a refried beans commercial).²² This scene, as well as the previous, is based on the mad tea party from *Alice in Wonderland*. There, the Hatter asks Alice a riddle she can't answer, and then, along with the Dormouse and the March Hare, they all have tea. The absurd and enigmatic conversations that take place in Carroll's text are preserved in González's play. The characters constantly argue whilst they demean each other:

AZTEC PRIEST. I speak *Nahuatl*. My Indian tongue. [...]

FLAMENCO DANCER. I speak the real Spanish. *Castellano*.

SUGAR SKULL (annoyed). What? And the rest of us speak *crappy* Spanish?

ALICIA. Stop! I don't get it. Why are you one-upping each other?

FLAMENCO DANCER. Because we're different.

ALICIA. Yes, we are, but we are also the same. Aren't we all human?

SUGAR SKULL. I'm made of sugar. (p. 51)

Alicia undergoes another test when she is asked by the dinner members to sing a Spanish song. With difficulty, she manages to sing a song she remembers from her childhood and she is told where the pottery maker lives. The latter discloses to Alicia and Ramón the mystery of the trapped souls by explaining that souls have to stay in a pot until summoned to enter heaven. He tells Alicia that she shouldn't feel guilty about having broken a pot in the shop since that was its destiny. The pottery maker, a representation of the Wizard of Oz, also restores Ramón's personality by giving him

²² It is worth noting that these characters embody stereotyped and famous elements and personalities from Latino/a culture. They symbolize the fragmented way in which Latino/a culture is presented in the United States.

a new trumpet. Becoming aware that Rosa is in danger, Alicia runs to save her from the Elvira gang. Having realized that cultural items and music are hated by the Elviras, Alicia tells Ramón to play some music with his trumpet. This, as well as throwing a paper flower at them, makes them melt, leaving a puddle of mascara behind. The annihilation of the Elviras symbolizes the final test that guarantees that Alicia rejects assimilation and accepts her cultural identity. Alicia wakes up back in the curio shop, and anxiously describes her trip, in Spanish and English. As in *The Wizard of Oz*, Alicia realizes that some characters from her journey are certain persons from real life. Thus, Ramón turns out to be the shopkeeper, and Rosa her mother. She demonstrates her knowledge of Mexican culture by explaining to her mother the significance of a sugar skull. After buying a Mexican doll and a paper flower, Alicia and her mother head for home where her father is waiting for them with some cooked goat head. The young protagonist leaves the shop 'extremely happy over her whole experience.' (p. 70)

Although this play presents a teenager's acceptance of her ethnic identity as an unproblematic and natural step in her life, we must not take the plot out of its fantasy context, where a happy ending is compulsory. The sudden, uncomplicated embrace of her roots is also unrealistic since it is hard to believe that a teenager such as Alicia, who is immersed in U.S. consumerist practices, would radically change her attitude towards her culture from one day to the next.

There is no place like Mexico: the representation of home

The absurd and original disparities presented in the two mainstream tales allow the Chicana playwright to reconstruct them, including references to Mexican culture. The re-appropriation of the themes of home and family enables González to expand on the migrant's nostalgic vision of the mother country. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the trip through Oz permits Dorothy to understand the value of her home and family, leading

her to utter the well-known statement 'There is no place like home'. Whilst home in the mainstream text is easily interpreted as her family and community, in the Chicano/a rendering, valuing home involves accepting one's ancestry.²³ Thus, González exposes that *home* for Chicanos/as is a more problematic concept than the way it is presented in the classical film. Whilst growing up in the original tale is equated with valuing one's family, in *Alicia* it additionally entails accepting one's ethnic origins in a society that puts pressure on assimilation.

Despite the popularity and apparent straightforward message of the canonical film, some critics have deciphered a subversive message in this children's tale. In his analysis of the film, Salman Rushdie challenges the notion that this narrative stresses the worth of home and the benefits of staying where one belongs:

Anybody who has swallowed the scriptwriters' notion that this is a film about the superiority of 'home' over 'away', that the 'moral' of *The Wizard of Oz* is as sickly-sweet as an embroidered sampler - East, West, home's best - would do well to listen to the yearning in Judy Garland's voice, as her face tilts up towards the skies. What she expresses here, what she embodies with the purity of an archetype, is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots. At the heart of *The Wizard of Oz* is a great tension between these two dreams; but as the music swells and that big, clean voice flies into the anguished longings of the song, can anyone doubt which message is the stronger? In its most potent emotional moment, this is unarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the greyness and entering the colour of making a new life in the 'place where there isn't any trouble'.²⁴

Rushdie is not the only critic that argues that this narrative attaches more importance to *leaving* than *staying*. Jack Zipes maintains that Oz represents 'an utopian counterpart to America, what America could become but has not'.²⁵ He supports this argument by revealing that the author of the tale, Frank L. Baum, 'kept sending Dorothy back to Oz over the course of fourteen novels and eventually had her remain (with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry) in Oz, safe from the capitalist bankers

²³ Nathanson explains that *The Wizard of Oz*'s message about the worth of home was related with the political circumstances in which the film appeared: 'In 1939, with another war about to begin, learning (or reaffirming) this lesson must have seemed particularly urgent to many Americans. (p. 103)

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 23.

²⁵ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth. Myth as Fairy Tale* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 128. Zipes also discusses this classical tale in his book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion. The classical genre for children and the process of civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1983)

and Eastern businessmen in America.' (p. 128) González develops this subversive idea by intertwining it with issues related to migration and the consequent nostalgic vision of the homeland.

As previously mentioned, *home* is a complicated notion for second-generation immigrants such as Alicia. Second generations maintain a complex relation with their parents' homeland, since they might never visit or go back to the country their parents came from.²⁶ Having lived all their lives in the host country, the United States, links with the homeland are poor. Maria de los Angeles Torres expands on this and explains that the assimilation model:

predicts that recent immigrants do not participate in politics immediately after their arrival in the host country because they are still preoccupied with home country issues and with trying to adapt to a new environment. By the second generation, ties to the homeland have weakened.²⁷

The clash of attitudes by first and second generations towards *home* is obvious in the first scene of the play. Alicia's mother feels saddened by the fact that her daughter wants to buy stuff in the *mall* rather than in the Mexican curio shop. Alicia doesn't understand what the shopkeeper means by the word 'magia', to which her mother replies: 'She won't learn Spanish either.' (p. 8) The teenager reveals her assimilation into U.S. society by referring to the items sold in the shop as 'useless stuff' (p. 8). On the contrary, her mother shows her longing for Mexico and its culture. Making reference to the Mexican items sold, she says 'I miss these things' (p. 8). The text also suggests that she has visited the shop previously. Immediately

²⁶ This is not always the case as exemplified by the writer Sandra Cisneros. In her autobiographical piece 'From a Writer's Notebook', Cisneros explains that her family visited Mexico quite often due to the homesickness of her father: 'Every couple of years we would have to pack all out things, store furniture I don't know where, pile into the station wagon, and head south to Mexico. It was usually a stay of few months, always at the grandparents' house on La Fortuna, número 12. That famous house, the only constant in the series of traumatic upheavals we experienced as children, and, no doubt for a stubborn period of time, my father's only legitimate "home" as well.' (p. 69) This passage expresses her father's nostalgia for his homeland and zeal to accept Mexico as his only *home*. Richard Rodríguez also expresses Mexican Americans' longing for the homeland by stating that the majority live in Southwestern United States, 'one or two hours from Mexico, which is within the possibility of recourse to Mexico or within the sound of her voice.' In *Days of Obligation. An Argument with my Mexican Father* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 49.

²⁷ María de los Angeles Torres, 'Transnational Politics and Cultural Identities Crossing Theoretical Borders', in *Borderless Borders*, ed. by Bonilla and other, pp. 169-82 (p. 170).

after Alicia faints and enters Wonder Tierra, the doll Rosa – whom we know is really her mother – reveals to Alicia the alienation she feels:

In the far reaches of the mind, I see you. I see myself. I see the whole world, and I wonder about so many things as I look out in a gaze. [...] I see your world, and I see my own. In both places I find isolation. I find loneliness. I find a person that I am and am not. I find a world made of animals in human clothing and humans in animal drapes. It hangs on a thread. (p. 9)

This passage mirrors the mother's, a first generation immigrant's, sense of displacement and estrangement in the United States. These feelings of liminality and isolation are also disclosed by another Chicano writer, Sandra Cisneros, who speaks of the 'schizophrenia [of] being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture.'²⁸

Sad to see her daughter rejecting her roots, Alicia's mother makes her undergo a journey through Wonder Tierra, a magical land representing the richness of Mexican culture and history. This is indicated at the end of the journey when Alicia asks Rosa: 'Why were you running away?' and Rosa replies: 'So you can run into yourself.' (pp. 65-66) Alicia must learn to accept both cultural aspects of her identity, by fighting both assimilation into the U.S. and indifference to her parents' background.

But this marvellous land is not a truthful portrayal of Mexico, but rather a fragmented image of its culture and history. That is, the Mexico that Alicia visits in her unconscious state represents her mother's recollection of Mexico, the outcome of memory combined with nostalgia. Thus, Alicia's journey through Mexico is a pleasant encounter with curious and interesting characters and customs. The only dangerous aspect of the trip resides in the risk of assimilation into U.S. society, embodied by the Elvira gang. No negative aspects about Mexico are mentioned or presented during the trip. Rosemary Marangoly George maintains that envisioning a *home* is not an indifferent or neutral task, '[...] the notion of "home" is built [around]

²⁸ Pilar E. Rodríguez Aranda, p. 66.

a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions.²⁹ This is reflected in the text as the motives that caused Alicia's parents to migrate to the U.S. – possibly unemployment – are not mentioned. Disclosing negative aspects of the homeland would break the magical aura created around *home*. John Durham Peters argues that the migrant's idealization of the homeland is a result of his/her exile:

[...] another feature of exile [is] its fecundity in producing compensatory fantasies and longings. [...] The shock, disruption, or loss accompanying exile, together with the distance from the home's mundane realities, can invite the project of restoring the "original" – the original home, the original state of being. Idealization often goes with mourning.³⁰

It is significant that González chooses the genre of children's tale to address the nostalgic vision of the homeland. In the migrant's mind, home becomes a mythical place where, in the words of the original dreamer Dorothy, 'the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.' In his autobiographical book, *Days of Obligation*, Richard Rodríguez touches on many issues addressed by González in her play. Rodríguez writes extensively on the problems faced by himself, a second generation Mexican, who learns about the homeland through his parents. Discovering Mexico through things such as magazines from Mexico City, he learns that 'Mexico was a real place with plenty of people walking around it.'³¹ Aware that Mexico may not always be seen encouragingly by their son, his parents try to present Mexico in a positive light: 'My mother said Mexico had skyscrapers. "Do not judge Mexico by the poor people you see coming up to this country."' (p. 214) The return to the homeland is described in a fairy-tale manner:

"Someday you will go there," my mother would say. "Someday you'll go down and with all your education you will be 'Don Ricardo.' All the pretty girls will be after you." We would turn magically rich in Mexico – such was the rate of exchange – our fortune would be multiplied by nine, like a dog's age. We would be rich, we would be happy in Mexico. (p. 215)

²⁹ Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

³⁰ John Durham Peters, 'Exile, Nomadism and Diaspora', in *Home, Exile, Homeland*, ed. by Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 17–41 (p. 19).

³¹ Rodríguez, *Days of Obligation*, p. 4.

But the maintenance of this fabulous land in one's imagination depends on the migrant *not* returning to the *real* place, the homeland. Returning may break the magical spell and confront the dreamer with a different reality. Despite the positive outcome of her journey through Wonder Tierra, Alicia does not voice a desire to visit Mexico even though she 'is extremely happy over her whole experience.' (p. 70); nor does her mother say that one day they will all visit or return to the homeland. Hamid Naficy develops this observation in his introduction to *Home, Exile, Homeland*:

[...], the frustrating elusiveness of return makes it [homeland] magically potent. [...] It is possible to return and to find that one's house is not the home that one had hoped for, that it is not the structure that memory built. [...] It is possible to be able to return and choose not to do so, but instead continue to dream of and imagine a glorious return.³²

Returning home for good may not be a positive event after all; Mexicans who leave the homeland may be viewed as traitors and thus not accepted when they return. This problem is addressed by Richard Rodríguez who despite claiming that 'Mexico was not interested in passports. [...] No matter how far away you moved, you were still related to her' (p. 57). He also reveals how Chicanos are branded *pochos*, neither Mexican nor American:

When we return to Mexico as *turistas*, with our little wads of greenbacks, our credit cards, our Japanese cameras, our Bermuda shorts, our pauses for directions and our pointing fingers, Mexico condescends to take our order (our order in halting Spanish), *claro señor*. But the table is not cleared; the table will never be cleared. Mexico prefers to reply in English, as a way of saying: ¡*Pocho*!

The Mexican American who forgets his true mother is a *pochito*, a person of no address, a child of no proper idiom.³³

Alicia, as well as her mother, is aware that home will maintain its magical quality as long as they don't return there and face the socio-economic realities that led them to immigrate in the first place.³⁴ Her mother describes the curio shop as 'puro centro Mexico' (p. 70) implying that the bazaar represents a place where one

³² Hamid Naficy, 'Introduction', in *Home, Exile, Homeland*, p. 3.

³³ *Days of Obligation*, p. 58.

³⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, makes a similar point when he discusses the hostility existing between Mexicans and Chicanos: 'At present, the only thing that unites those who left Mexico and those who stayed is our inability to understand and accept our inevitable differences. We detect the existence of these invisible borders, but we are unable to articulate them, much less cross them with tact.' (p. 135) In '1995-terreno peligroso/Danger Zone: Cultural Relations Between Chicanos and Mexicans at the End of the Century', p. 135.

can go to re-experience home. The text suggests that Alicia will accompany her mother in her visits to the shop in order to nourish her newfound vision of *home*.

The play also addresses the fact that the recollection of the motherland is jeopardized by the filtration of stereotypical portrayals of people of Mexican origin such as a *pachuco* and a Mambo King. This indicates that the perpetuation of commodified images of Mexicans in the U.S. society threatens her daughter's understanding of her culture. Sandoval and Sternbach argue a similar point when they say that Alicia

must learn to distinguish between the stereotypes and cultura [...] she even appropriates the tourist-driven velvet paintings of Tijuana as legitimate representations of Mexican art. The fact that Tijuana plays so largely in the plot indicates the extent to which Alicia is unable to distinguish between Mexican culture, U.S.-imposed commodification of stereotypes of Mexican culture and a new paradigm of transcultural, transnational border identity.³⁵

The portrayal of Wonder Tierra as a utopian space that romanticizes Mexico whilst it hides its negative characteristics is reminiscent of the concept of Aztlán. Resurrected during the Chicano movement as a unifying symbol that evoked the indigenous roots of Chicanos/as, it invested a sense of pride and resistance against U.S. society. Aztlán was imagined in a similar manner to Oz, that is, as the land of Mexicans and Chicanos/as and as the counterpart to the racist U.S. society. According to Norma Klahn, Chicanos/as perceived the mythical symbol of Aztlán as '[...] a utopian space where a new identity could be constructed perhaps as problematic, but certainly establishing a point of departure.'³⁶ I believe the representation of Wonder Tierra as a utopian land becomes intertwined with the concept of Aztlán, thus bringing to mind the political struggle of the Chicano movement and the social inequalities that people like Alicia's parents must have suffered as immigrants and members of an ethnic minority in the U.S. According to

³⁵ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, p. 182.

³⁶ Norma Klahn, 'Writing the Border', in *Common Borders, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, ed. by Jaime E. Rodríguez O. and Kathryn Vincent (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1997), pp. 123-41 (p. 138).

Zipes, the success of *The Wizard of Oz* is based on the portrayal of a utopian counterpart to the U.S.:

[...] throughout the past century, Americans keep returning to the Oz material not because of the American myth but because of the promises that America as a nation has failed to keep. Oz is the utopia that exposes the myth of America as land of the free and brave as lie.³⁷

González could have *translated* Dorothy's famous song at the end of the film in this way: 'Somewhere, over the *border* (instead of 'rainbow'), way *down* there ('up high'), there's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.' Whilst Anglo-Americans possess the dreamlike land Oz in their imagination, Mexican immigrants have Mexico instead. Salman Rushdie states that a new vision of the homeland arises when one becomes an exile, emigrant or expatriate: '[...] our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that [...] we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.'³⁸ Once we understand how nostalgia interacts in the remembrance of the homeland, we can look back at Dorothy's famous statement at the end of the film. Even though Alicia does not utter 'There is no place like home', the intertextuality of the play allows us to fully comprehend González's articulation of *home*. As it has been previously pointed out, 'there is no place like home' is an ambiguous statement.³⁹ These words can be read in two ways. On the one hand, home is an irreplaceable and special place, and it should be valued because of its uniqueness. On the other hand, it negates the existence of home, implying that a place like that doesn't exist. Whilst in the film version, it should be interpreted as the first definition, González's play exemplifies the second interpretation. *Home* doesn't exist, because it is a creation of nostalgia.

³⁷ *Fairy Tale as Myth*, p. 128.

³⁸ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), pp. 9-21 (p. 10).

³⁹ Reni Celeste discusses the treatment of *The Wizard of Oz* in the filmic work of David Lynch and draws attention to the contradictory message of these words. See 'Lost Highway: Unveiling Cinema's Yellow Brick Road', *Cineaction*, 43 (1997), 32-39.

As Salman Rushdie remarks, *The Wizard of Oz* expresses 'a great tension' between the dream of leaving and the dream of staying (p. 23). Silvia González originally appropriates some of the film's ambiguities in order to reproduce the nostalgic relation between Mexican-Americans and their country of origin. The Chicana playwright reveals that a mainstream tale that deals with the idea of home may be interpreted quite differently by immigrant children who have, in a sense, two homes. Her translation of two canonical Western tales also discloses that fantasy is not only bound to the realm of children, but that it plays a significant role in the migrant's identity.

The *barrio* and fairy tales

Sandra Cisneros also incorporates and rewrites canonical children's tales in one of her books. Since its first publication in 1984, *The House on Mango Street*⁴⁰ has experienced an enormous success, finding its way into university literature syllabi.⁴¹ The novel describes the experiences of the Latino members of a Chicago *barrio* from the point of view of the young protagonist, Esperanza.⁴² Although Esperanza doesn't have issues with her cultural identity, she doesn't feel at home in the *barrio* or in her own house. At the beginning of the novel, we are told she longs to have 'a real

⁴⁰ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Random House, 1991)

⁴¹ Rubén Medina explains that a Latino editing house, Arte Público Press, first published the book in 1984 but Random House reedited it in 1991, guaranteeing a larger circulation. See 'Hegemonía, papeles femeninos y desarticulación en *The House on Mango Street* de Sandra Cisneros', in *Foro Hispánico 9: Literatura Chicana*, ed. by Huberman Hermans and Francisco Lasarte (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 41-51.

In 1989, Ellen McCracken argues in an article that Cisneros's book 'is likely to continue to be excluded from the canon because it "speaks another language altogether", one to which the critics of the literary establishment "remain blind"'. (p. 63) See 'Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*: Community-Oriented Introspection and the demystification of Patriarchal Violence', in *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*, ed. by Asunción Horno-Delgado et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), pp. 62-81. The success of this book and its presence in university literature syllabi across the United States and Europe a decade later prove her wrong. The inclusion of this book into the mainstream literary canon confirms the rising interest in Chicano/a writing across the world.

⁴² Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero note that *barrio* is sometimes translated as 'slum', addressing the economic and social conditions of these Spanish-speaking areas. See *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, ed. by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1993), p. 158.

house' (p. 5), not like the one her family own where 'bricks are crumbling on places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in.' (p. 4) In an autobiographical piece, Cisneros explains that her book is a response to a discussion she participated at a writer's workshop on Gaston Bachelard's representation of home and houses in *The Poetics of Space*. She explains:

[...] the metaphor of the house – a house, a house, it hit me. What did I know except third-floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that. That's precisely what I chose to write: about third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through the window, anything as far from the poetic as possible.⁴³

Unable to identify home with a sense of safety and warmth, Esperanza (hope) is eager to leave the *barrio* with its violence and patriarchal abuse. Her longing for 'a house all of my own, [...] not a man's house' (p. 108) drives her to leave the *barrio* in pursuit of an education. But, by the end of the narrative, a mature Esperanza understands that she must leave her community but that she 'must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as [her].' (p. 105) The book suggests that the protagonist will leave the *barrio* in pursuit of an education but that she will return to improve its socio-economic situation. This text can also be interpreted as a response to the romanticization of the *barrio* found in early Chicano literature. In an interview, Cisneros explains:

I wrote it as a reaction against those people who want to make our barrios look like Sesame Street, or some place really warm and beautiful. Poor neighborhoods lose their charm after dark, they really do. [...] if you've got to live there every day, and deal with [...] kids getting shot in your backyard, and people running through your gangway at night, and rats, and poor housing ... It loses its charm real quick! [...] I saw it a lot differently than those "chingones" that are writing all those bullshit pieces about their barrios.⁴⁴

From Esperanza's point of view, the reader learns of the economic problems of the community and of the physical and sexual abuse undergone by many of its

⁴³ Cisneros, 'From a Writer's Notebook', p. 73.

⁴⁴ Rodríguez Aranda, 'On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros', p. 68. Cisneros refers to the Chicano writers who during the Chicano movement, portrayed the *barrio* as an idyllic space. According to Vernon E. Lattin, this literary period represents the *barrio* as 'a spiritual home and haven for the Chicano. [...] [There is] a sense of support and hope [...]' (p. 191) In 'Contemporary Chicano Novel, 1959-1979', in *Chicano Literature. A Reference Guide*, ed. by Francisco A. Lomeli and Julio A. Martínez (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 184-197.

female members. Although this text has been discussed in numerous articles and books, the articulation of fairy tales has not been sufficiently developed.⁴⁵ This chapter concentrates on the ways in which the innocent world of the fairy tale is reconfigured and adopted into a narrative that deals with the life of working-class Latinas. Since the narrator of the book is a child, she describes the world around her through references to characters and situations from fairy tales.⁴⁶ But the introduction of this discourse in the description of *barrio* life does not glamorise nor hide its negative aspects. The enchanting and innocent world of the fairy tale is compared to incidents where the protagonist or members of the community are abused, thus emphasising on the severity of the situation.

Despite her young age, Esperanza is conscious of the economic and racial oppression endured by the members of her *barrio*. But, it is the abuse suffered by the women that is mostly noticed by her. In the vignette 'The Family of Little Feet', Esperanza and her friends Lucy and Rachel are given three pairs of grown-up women's shoes. The shoes enable them to fantasize about being part of a fairy tale world: 'Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly [...]' (p. 40). The shoes also allow them to feel like grown-ups and be aware of their bodies. When they put them on, they discover that they 'have legs. Skinny [...] but good to look at, and long.' (p. 40). The shoes allow them the entrance into the adult world to the

⁴⁵ For a further discussion of this text, refer to Julián Olivares, 'Sandra Cisneros' 'The House on Mango Street' and the Poetics of Space', in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature*, ed. by María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 233-44; Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, 'The Book on Mango Street: Escritura y Liberación en la obra de Sandra Cisneros', in *Mujer y Literatura Mexicana y Chicana: Culturas en contacto*, ed. by Aralia López González et al. (Mexico: Colegio de México and Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1994), pp. 249-54.

⁴⁶ Cisneros expresses the influence of fairy tales in her writing in an interview conducted by Pilar E. Rodríguez Aranda. Talking about her teaching experiences, she laments that television is substituting the role of fairy tales: 'I think that maybe the visual is taking the place of the oral myth. Sometimes I have to make allusions in my class. [...] I'd make an allusion to the "Little Mermaid" or the "Snow Queen," which are very important to me, and an integral part of my childhood and my storytelling ability today! [...] But if I made an illusion [sic] to Fred Flintstone, everyone knew who Fred Flintstone was. [...] That was our common mythology, that's what we all had in common, television.' (pp. 6-77) It is also significant that during the interview she makes references to this discourse: '[...] I am at peace with myself and I don't feel terrified by anyone [...] I guess I've created a house made of bricks that no big bad wolf can blow down now.' (p. 74)

extent that Esperanza calls them 'those magic high heels' (p. 40). Walking down the street, the girls realize that 'men can't take their eyes off us.' (p. 40) Mr. Benny from the grocery scolds them: 'Your mother know you got shoes like that? [...] Them are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them off before I call the cops [...].'(p. 41) A passing boy shouts at them 'Ladies, lead me to heaven.' (p. 41) Some other girls from the neighbourhood pretend to ignore them because they are 'always jealous.' (p. 41) Glad to receive so much attention, they decide 'these are the best shoes. We will never go back to wearing the other kind again.' (p. 41) But the amusing tale of Cinderella turns into *The Little Red Riding Hood* when in front of the tavern, a tramp takes interest in Rachel:

Do you like these shoes?

Bum man says. Yes, little girl.

Your little lemon shoes are so beautiful. But come closer. I can't see very well. Come closer. Please.

You are a pretty girl, bum man continues. What's your name, pretty girl?

And Rachel says Rachel, just like that. [...] She is young and dizzy to hear so many sweet things in one day, even if it is a bum man's whiskey words saying them.

Rachel, you are prettier than a yellow taxicab. You know that?

But we don't like it. We got to go, Lucy says.

If I give you a dollar will you kiss me? [...], and he looks in his pocket for wrinkled money. (pp. 41-42)

The classical tale *Little Red Riding Hood* has been extensively researched by scholars such as Jack Zipes, who has traced the origins of this tale and uncovered previous versions where sexual undertones are clear.⁴⁷ In earlier versions, the young protagonist unwittingly eats the flesh and blood of her grandmother and the wolf almost rapes her. Charles Perrault, the seventeenth century French writer who collected this oral tale, re-wrote it erasing obvious sexual connotations in order 'not to offend the tastes of upper-class society.'⁴⁸ Despite the sanitization suffered by the tale, Jack Zipes argues that the story nowadays carries 'a good warning for girls

⁴⁷ The fascination provoked by this classical tale is testified by the volume edited by Jack Zipes that collects thirty-five versions of the tale, ranging from the Brothers Grimm to Angela Carter. See *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (London: Routledge, 1993)

⁴⁸ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 29.

when you consider how widespread rape is in our culture.'⁴⁹ He states that the tale implies that the protagonist is responsible for the danger she faces as she should have not 'strayed off the straight path to her grandmother's house, to domesticity [...].'⁵⁰ It is significant that in Cisneros's re-articulation of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the sexual connotations of the original tale become obvious, construing the wolf as a paedophile. Her adaptation of the tale in the contemporary setting brings out the original content of the tale. Life in a *barrio* has no room for the 'tastes of the upper-class society' and therefore mirrors the harsh realities that the Perrault version attempted to disguise. By reconfiguring the figure of the wolf as a paedophile or a rapist, Cisneros also pinpoints the individuals who are considered dangerous to children in contemporary society. Marina Warner makes a similar point in her book *No Go the Bogeyman* where she argues that the figure of the bogeyman adapts to modern fears and threats:

Paedophiles are our late millennial ogres, and they bring the bogeyman very much closer to home than aliens or medieval devils. [...] the farther away fantasies situate the source of danger, the greater the sense of security at home, even though it is within the home and the family that the most damaging conflicts and hurt arise.⁵¹

Bruno Bettelheim also expresses his views on this classical fairy tale. He brings attention to the colour of the girl's clothes claiming that 'red in the color symbolizing violent emotions, very much including sexual ones. [...] She is too little, not for wearing the cap, but for managing what this red cap symbolizes, and what her wearing it invites.'⁵² Little Red Riding Hood is unaware of what her red hood stands for, similarly to the girls from Cisneros's book, who do not realize that wearing high heels at such a young age can be interpreted as an invitation for sex. After the unpleasant encounter with the tramp, the girls become 'tired of being beautiful' (p.

⁴⁹ Jack Zipes, 'Prologue: Framing Little Red Riding Hood', in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 9.

⁵¹ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 386-87.

⁵² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 173.

42) and put the shoes away. The high heels have enabled them to experience what it is like to be a grown-up woman and to understand that it has nothing to do with the world depicted in Cinderella.⁵³

The tale of Cinderella functions again as a counterpoint to Latina life in the vignette 'No speak English'. Esperanza narrates the experiences of a neighbour called Mamacita, a woman who does not leave her house and does not speak English. She has recently arrived with her baby to join her husband in the United States. Despite having brought with her 'lavender hatboxes, a dozen boxes of satin high heels' (p. 77), she doesn't leave the flat. Esperanza believes the reason for this is 'because she is afraid to speak English [...]' (p. 77) Instead, she 'sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull.' (p. 77) Mamacita may have the elegant outfits to go the ball and meet her prince (satin high heels, luxurious hats) but her lack of English and sense of displacement prevent her from socialization.⁵⁴

In the vignette 'Rafaela who drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays,' Esperanza compares Rafaela, another Latina woman from the *barrio*, with a fairy tale character: 'Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel's.' (p. 79) But in her case, it is not a jealous mother who has locked Rafaela up but her possessive husband who 'is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at.' (p. 79) On Tuesdays, Esperanza and her friends send her up some coconut and papaya juice through the use of a paper shopping bag

⁵³ The text's allusions to the classical tales of Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood have also been remarked by Rubén Medina: ' [...] en la nueva versión del cuento de la caperucita roja que rearticula Cisneros, el lobo encarna en un representante del poder patriarcal que busca convertir a una niña en un objeto vendible.' (p. 46) (in the new version of the tale 'Little Red Riding Hood' rearticulated by Cisneros, the wolf represents the patriarchal power that tries to turn the girl into an object up for sale.)

⁵⁴ This vignette also deals with the themes of home and nostalgia. The immigrant woman doesn't want to accept the United States as her *home* and refuses to learn English. But her husband tries to persuade her to accept the new country as their new homeland: ' "¡Ay caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!" (p. 78)

and a clothesline.⁵⁵ Thus, thanks to her female friends, Rafaela can experience some type of enjoyment during her imprisonment.

In another vignette, the underprivileged situation of a family is compared to the theme from a nursery rhyme. The vignette is entitled 'There was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do' evoking once again a children's world.⁵⁶ Whilst a child may not be aware of the cruelty of the situation described in the rhyme, Esperanza is conscious of the economic deprivation of a Latino/a single-parent family. Abandoned by her husband 'without even leaving a dollar for bologna' (p. 29), Rosa Vargas can't look properly after her children, who end up 'bounc[ing] between cars' and not being suitably supervised until one day one of the children 'learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an "Oh"'. (p. 30) The innocent world recalled to mind in the title harshly contrasts with the events narrated in the story.

In another instance, Esperanza painfully learns of the lack of correlation between real life and fiction when she is sexually abused in an amusement park while waiting for her friend Sally: 'Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?' (p. 99) This terrible experience makes Esperanza realize that 'All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong.' (p. 100) She understands that her life and experiences are very dissimilar to those presented in films, books or fairy tales. By the end of the book, she comprehends that she must leave the *barrio* but that she

⁵⁵ Ellen McCracken also discusses this passage and argues in *New Latina Narrative* that 'Metonymic symbols of the island she has emigrated from and the good times other women are enjoying at the dance hall down the street, these elements of Latino culture are only models of making do, Cisneros suggests.' (p. 181)

⁵⁶ The nursery rhyme brought to mind is 'There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children, she didn't know what to do; she gave them some broth without any bread; she whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.' In *The Oxford Rhyme Book* (assembled by Ione and Peter Opie) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955)

must come back to help change the socio-economic conditions of her community. A mature Esperanza understands that fairy tales are not realistic and that no prince will come to the *barrio* and rescue her from its poverty and violence. However, she must become *herself* the prince who will come back to save others. In this sense, Cisneros re-writes classical fairy tales that depict the hero as male and instead presents a committed heroine who will help her community.

La Llorona: Chicanas' bogeywoman

'[...] la Llorona, Daughter of Night, travelling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself.'⁵⁷

Mexican folklore provides another set of bogeymen/women and mythic motifs from which Chicana writers draw. Figures such as El Coco (also known as Cocui) are bogeymen used in Mexican culture to prevent children from misbehaving, but the most popular is La Llorona, the weeping woman. Even though La Llorona is used to scare children, she is, most importantly, one of the three female role models from Mexican culture. To describe La Llorona as merely a scary female icon undermines the patriarchal dimension of the figure as well as its relevance within Mexican/Chicano/a folklore. In Chicana writing, she undergoes a similar deconstruction and re-articulation as that experienced by the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche.

La Llorona is a folk tale; meaning that there exist numerous versions, rather than a unique, original account.⁵⁸ The most well known tale narrates that a woman

⁵⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 38.

⁵⁸ Another important Mexican oral tradition is the *corrido* (ballad). Originating in the Spanish romance, it appeared in the mid-nineteenth century as a form that narrated the events of the time. According to John H. McDowell, the significance of the *corrido* lies in the fact that it recounts history 'from the viewpoint of the common people, and not from the official record or sophisticated overview of the learned historian.' In 'Mexican American Oral Traditions', in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures*, pp. 220-26 (p. 221). Particularly relevant is the border *corrido* arising from the conflicts in the Mexican-American border. The *corrido* has also served as an instrument of protest for the Mexican immigrants in the U.S. In her book *Northward Bound. The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song*, Maria Herrera-Sobek collects and analyses *corridos* that narrate the circumstances and problems (such as repatriation and assimilation) of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993)

drowned her children into the river because her husband or lover abandoned her. God forbade her entrance in Heaven and condemned her to look for the souls of her children. She is then said to be seen roaming the banks of rivers searching for her children, screaming '¡Ay, mis hijos!' Since she desperately wants her children back, she may kidnap other people's offspring whilst they sleep. Parents tell their children to go early to bed or not to come home late because La Llorona may mistake them for her own offspring and take them with her.⁵⁹

In some versions, the story takes place during colonial times and La Llorona is a *mestizo* woman who has children out of wedlock with a Spaniard. When informed that the Spaniard was going to marry another woman from a high social status, the *mestiza* kills her children in a rage of madness. The figure of La Llorona is sometimes linked with that of La Malinche. Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enriquez provide the popular version that narrates that, La Malinche, aware that Cortés was leaving Mexico after the conquest, 'protested his leave-taking by stabbing and throwing their young son from a balcony and later cried out with bitter regret [...].'⁶⁰ Sandra Messinger Cypress also claims that these two icons are associated in some tales 'because they share a sadness relating to lost children. In popular mythology La Malinche serves as a synecdoche for all Indian women who lament the fate of their progeny to the Spanish conquistadors.'⁶¹

Other variants present La Llorona as a beautiful woman who seduces men and then harms them. This action takes place at night, suggesting that this siren-type figure assaults men who deserve to be punished: either because they have been

⁵⁹ The popularity of this legend is reflected in a recent advert by California milk producers. Aware that teenagers are not drinking enough milk, milk producers created an advert targeting this social group. The advert attempts to instigate the consumption of milk by using the figure of La Llorona, who cries after finding the milk carton in the fridge empty. See <http://www.hispaniconline.com/buss&finn/article.html?SMContentIndex=O&SMContentSet=O>

⁶⁰ Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enriquez, 'Cultural Heritage I: Mexico', *La Chicana: the Mexican-American Woman*, pp. 14-52, (pp. 32-33).

⁶¹ Messinger Cypress, p. 7.

drinking or they have been unfaithful to their wives.⁶² Instead of being a threat to misbehaving children, she attacks *misbehaving* men, implying that this tale warns men against going out at night. However, Rosan A. Jordan perceives another dimension in this type of story, saying that it could 'reflect men's fear of women just as much as women's desire to retaliate against male sexual aggression.'⁶³ This tale has been associated with the *vagina dentata* motif, which, according to Erich Neumann, is mostly found in the mythology of the North American Indians. This myth represents 'the destructive and deathly womb, [it] appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth.'⁶⁴

The most fascinating aspect of this legend is its capacity to adapt to different epochs and to address the socio-political circumstances of different periods. One tale takes place during the Mexican Revolution and positions La Llorona as a mother whose sons fought for Pancho Villa and who were believed to be dead. The tale of La Llorona addresses an important aspect of storytelling, that is, its changeability depending on who is the narrator. Pamela Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes have collected and analysed versions of La Llorona that were narrated by Latina women in the United States. In an article published in 1968, Hawes collects and discusses the different versions of this tale as told by the female inmates of a correction centre of Los Angeles. Hawes argues that the protagonist of the stories is a 'dangerous adult woman'.⁶⁵ After presenting various versions of the tale which involve motifs such as mutilation and attacking women, Hawes argues that the delinquent girls express through these tales the fear of 'loss of children, loss of beauty, loss of life' (p. 165) and thus that they are not 'victims of "irrational superstitions," but instead are

⁶² Michael Kearney discusses this type of Llorona tale in his article 'La Llorona as a Social Symbol', *Western Folklore*, 28.3 (1969), 199-206.

⁶³ Rosan Jordan, 'The Vaginal Serpent and Other Themes from Mexican-American Lore', in *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, ed. by Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalcik (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 26-44 (p. 27).

⁶⁴ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of The Archetype* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 168.

⁶⁵ Bess Lomax Hawes, 'La Llorona in Juvenile Hall', *Western Folklore*, 27.3 (1968), 153-70 (p. 156).

signalling the basic realities of their situation.' (p. 169) Pamela Jones makes a similar point in her article concentrating on the stories narrated by two groups: female Mexican immigrants and young university students of Southern Oregon. In contrast to the stories told by the delinquent girls, La Llorona is not always responsible for the death of her children. In some versions she is 'driven to infanticide because of the dilemma of extreme poverty.'⁶⁶ Jones claims that the Mexican mothers express 'sympathy for her distress' and 'identif[y] with the llorona/mother figure' whilst the younger students 'highlighted the llorona/lover figure [...] and addressed anxieties related to the natural desire of these young adults to form intimate relationships' (p. 210). Jones concludes that La Llorona 'carries a different message depending on who does the storytelling.' (p. 211)

Clarissa Pinkola Estés says that the first time she heard the tale of La Llorona it involved a woman in a union-busting war in the area where Pinkola herself lived. She recounts other versions she had heard such as one related with 'the land grant wars in New Mexico; a rich developer took advantage of a poor but beautiful Spanish daughter.'⁶⁷ Other versions portray the mythical woman 'wail[ing] through a trailer park at night' and another one as a 'prostitute with AIDS' (p. 301). But the account that Pinkola finds most interesting is that of a woman who maintains a relationship with a rich man who owned factories by the river. The river became polluted, but the woman, unaware of this, drank water from it during her pregnancy. As a result, she gave birth to babies with signs of malformation. The partner rejected her and the newborns and married instead a rich woman. Aware of the bleak future that awaited her children, the woman drowned the babies in the river. Even though this version addresses contemporary environmental concerns, Pinkola maintains that

⁶⁶ Pamela Jones, ' "There Was a Woman": La Llorona in Oregon', *Western Folklore*, 57.3 (1998), 195-211 (p. 206).

⁶⁷ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women who Run with the Wolves: Connecting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London: Rider 1993), p. 301.

'this tale uses the metaphor of the beautiful woman and the pure river of life to describe a woman's creative process in its normal state. But here, when interactive with a destructive animus, both the woman and the river decline.' (pp. 303-04) Pinkola argues that La Llorona manages to subsist through generations because woman's creative life continues to be shattered and 'polluted'.

La Llorona tends to be described as wearing a long white robe and having long hair. On some occasions, she even has 'long, shiny fingernails [...] like knives by starlight'⁶⁸, a motif that brings her close to the witch archetype as well as to the pre-Columbian goddess Cihuacoatl. Despite the great amount of variants of La Llorona legend, one can conclude that this figure is portrayed negatively and functions as a counter example for women. As a mother, she commits the ultimate sin: she kills her children. As a woman, she maintains sexual relationships out of wedlock or with men of a different class. La Llorona warns young women not to have sex before marriage, especially with men from a higher social background. In the story, breaking social boundaries leads to madness and consequently to the murder of one's children. The siren-type tale presents women as seductresses who sleep with and harm men at night, positioning her again as a bad woman.⁶⁹ This argument is supported by Rodolfo Anaya in an article where he discusses the two bogeymen of Mexican/Chicano children. He believes that El Coco and La Llorona advise youngsters not to stay outside for too long and they 'warn the child not to indulge in sexual practices.'⁷⁰ Anaya argues that La Llorona (and El Coco) manages to scare young women by conveying two messages: on the one hand, one risks being attacked

⁶⁸ John West, 'The Weeping Woman: La Llorona' in *Legendary Ladies of Texas*, ed. by Francis Edwards Abernethy (Dallas: E. Heart Press, 1981), pp. 30-36 (p. 35).

⁶⁹ None of the scholars or writers who examine La Llorona establishes a link between her infanticide and the post-natal depression syndrome. La Llorona's madness and subsequent infanticide could be explored from this psychological dimension. The contemporary news provides actual infanticides committed by mothers which have been associated with this syndrome.

⁷⁰ Rodolfo Anaya, 'La Llorona, El Kookooee, and Sexuality', *The Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingue*, 17.1 (1992), 50-55 (p. 52).

by her if one stays out till late and on the other, maintaining sexual relationships before marriage carries a high price: madness and ostracism.

No matter how she is interpreted, La Llorona is always a symbol of treachery, treachery against her role as a woman and mother. Furthermore, she is a pitiful figure, if we consider that a repeated motif is her constant crying. As she is a frequent archetype in Mexican and Chicano folklore, it is no surprise that Chicana writers decide to revise the legend of La Llorona. The recurrence of this icon in Chicana writing attests to the indignation felt by Chicanas towards the one-dimensional portrayal of this female symbol.

Surprisingly, the enormous presence of this figure in Chicano/a literature is not paralleled in Mexican literature. Octavio Paz makes a passing remark to this mythical woman in *El laberinto de soledad* when he examines La Malinche as a symbol of motherhood: 'La Chingada es una de las representaciones mexicanas de la Maternidad, como la Llorona o la "sufrida madre" mexicana.'⁷¹ Luis Leal observes La Llorona in the character of Dorothea in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. Considering that Dorothea lives in a liminal state not having being allowed entrance into Heaven, he argues: '[...] Dorothea also symbolizes La Llorona, the mythical pre-Hispanic woman in search of her lost children. She walks about carrying a bundle believing it is her baby.'⁷² However, the subtext of La Llorona is present in numerous Mexican films. This is the argument of Charles Ramírez Berg, who maintains that in films such as Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *La pasión según Berenice* (1976) and Tulio Demicheli's *Los reglones torcidos de Dios* (1981) 'the pressures of attempting to be *la mujer perfecta* – the ideal woman – result in madness.'⁷³ In Mexican thriller b-movies, La Llorona appears as a malevolent spectre who must be annihilated by the

⁷¹ Paz, 'Los hijos de la Malinche', p. 212. 'the fucked woman is one of the representations of Maternity, like La Llorona or the Mexican 'suffering mother.' '

⁷² Luis Leal, *Juan Rulfo* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 80.

⁷³ Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, p. 77.

popular wrestler El Santo. The film *El Santo y Mantequilla en la venganza de la llorona* narrates that in the 17th century a Mexican woman killed her children in retaliation for the betrayal of her Spanish lover. Allied with Lucifer, her spectre kills the descendants of the Spanish nobleman.⁷⁴

In Mexico, this female figure is also known through a popular song, entitled 'La Llorona'. The song narrates a man's love for La Llorona, rather than the story of a murderous woman. Nevertheless, motifs like the river and crying are found: 'Llévame al río/ tápame con tu rebozo, llorona/ porque me muero de frío/No sé que tiene la flor/las flores del campo santo/que cuando las mueve el viento llorona/parece que están llorando'⁷⁵

In Mexican cultural production, La Llorona tends to represent an evil figure and anti-role model for women. Aware of the patriarchal dimension of this cultural icon, Chicana writers bring attention to other aspects that have been disregarded, such as her pre-Columbian origins. Hence, Chicanas invite the reader to interpret this icon as an empowering and multi-dimensional figure.

⁷⁴ See *El Santo y Mantequilla Napoles en la venganza de La Llorona*. Dir. Miguel M. Delgado. 1974. Even though this film is only a Mexican *b-movie*, it reflects not only that La Llorona is seen as a frightening figure but also that she is an important icon within Mexican popular culture. Chapter four will discuss in more detail the popular figure of El Santo.

See also Domino Renee Perez's thesis which examines articulations of La Llorona in films such as *Mi familia* by Gregory Nava (1996) and *Mi vida loca* by Allison Anders (1995). 'Revitalizing the Legend: Manifestations and Cultural Readings of La Llorona in Contemporary Literature and Film' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nebraska, 1999)

Narratives similar to the legend of La Llorona can be found in other films. In the film *The Others* (2001) by Spanish director Alejandro Amenábar, a similar plot takes place. During the Second World War, in an island off the British coast, a woman called Grace kills herself and her children. From that moment, Grace and her children become ghosts who live in a state of limbo. The film suggests that the death of her husband and the sinister circumstances under which they live (the house must be in darkness since the children are photosensitive to light) have led Grace to a state of insanity and consequently to infanticide and suicide. *The Others*. Dir. Alejandro Amenábar (2001)

⁷⁵ Chavela Vargas. *La Llorona*. WEA. CDIX 983262

(take me to the river / cover me with your shawl, llorona/ because I am very cold / I don't know what there is about the flower / the flowers of the saintly field/ that when they are shaken by the wind, llorona/ it looks like they were crying).

La Llorona's indigenous ancestors

In order to make La Llorona a positive female symbol, Chicanas use a strategy already employed in the deconstruction of the Virgin of Guadalupe. By tracing the European and especially pre-Columbian mythical figures from which she descends, Chicanas invest her with an empowering significance. Before discussing how Chicanas re-articulate this symbol, we must first look at the European and indigenous sources that shaped the myth of La Llorona.

Although emphasis tends to be placed on the indigenous background of La Llorona, we must not underestimate the European influence present in this tale. In his article 'Aztec Motifs in "La Llorona"', Robert A. Barakat argues that 'the basic pattern of the legend, betrayal and infanticide, is from the Old World upon which native elements have been grafted. At least the Mexicans were afforded a similar model, i.e., "Die Weisse Frau," from Europe with which they could associate their own legend, or motifs.'⁷⁶ Tey Diana Rebolledo links La Llorona with Europe through the 'Spanish medieval notions of *ánimas en pena*, spirits in purgatory expiating their sins, and to the Medea myth.'⁷⁷

Before discussing in detail the Aztec goddesses from which she descends, we must take into account the significance of the feminine within Aztec mythology. Susanna Rostas informs that in this mythology, 'the female is linked to darkness and night, unsurprisingly to the earth and closely to the underworld as the source of life'. The goddesses were also 'considered to be concerned with process, the processes of

⁷⁶ Robert A. Barakat, 'Aztec Motifs in "La Llorona"', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 29 (1965), 288-96 (p. 290).

⁷⁷ Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), p. 63.

birth and regeneration [...].⁷⁸ It is generally agreed that the two most important Aztec figures that influence the legend of La Llorona are Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue.⁷⁹

Cihuacoatl is also known as Snake Woman who 'was the most feared and effective of the goddesses'.⁸⁰ Burr Cartwright Brundage expounds:

The lower part of her face is shown as a crude bare jawbone, and the grisly mouth is stretched wide to indicate her hunger for victims. Her hair is long and stringy, and two knives form a kind of diadem on her forehead. She is clothed and painted in chalky white. She was referred to as a horror and a devourer: she brought nothing but misery and toil and death. On her back she carried the knife of sacrifice, swaddled as if it were her child. Among her many guiles was the ability to change herself into a serpent or into a lovely young woman who could entice young men who, after intercourse with her, withered away and died.⁸¹

It is also worth noting that Cihuacoatl also carried a cradle. According to Barakat 'she would leave her cradle [...] and would disappear into a lake or river. When native women looked into the abandoned cradle they did not find a baby, but an obsidian knife.' (p. 290) Rostas also reveals that Cihuacoatl was a 'night walker, screaming and weeping copiously' (p. 371). Not only has La Llorona *inherited* the physical appearance (long hair, white clothes) and destructive side from this goddess, but also the temptress woman aspect. Coatlicue or the Serpent Skirt, also 'had a thirst for blood and was hideous', she had a 'necklace consisting of human hands and hearts and a pendant made of a human skull, while her skirt is a writhing mass of serpents'.⁸² Most importantly, Coatlicue is also imagined as the Earth Mother 'who conceives all the celestial beings out of her cavernous womb'; she represents 'the dark world from which all beings spring and within whose body the terrible conflict takes place'.⁸³ Anzaldúa expresses a great devotion for this mythical figure and describes her as the 'Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life;

⁷⁸ Susanne Rostas, 'Mexican Mythology. Divine Androgyny But 'His' Story; The Female in Aztec Mythology', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. by Carolyn Larrington (London: Pandora Press, 1992), pp. 362-87 (p. 382).

⁷⁹ This argument is supported by Barakat and Rebolledo.

⁸⁰ Rostas, p. 370.

⁸¹ Burr Cartwright Brundage, 'The Goddesses', in *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 153-75 (p. 169).

⁸² Rostas, p. 371.

⁸³ Cartwright Brundage, p. 166.

she is the incarnation of cosmic processes.⁸⁴ Although she does not establish a strong link between her and La Llorona, she states that 'Coatlicue da luz a todo y a todo devora' (Coatlicue gives birth to everything and she devours everything), a characteristic that positions the Aztec goddess as an important influence on the weeping woman as she gives birth to her children and kills them.

There are other goddesses that may have influenced the La Llorona legend. Barakat proposes Chalchiuhtli 'who kills men in water' (p. 295) as a possible predecessor of the weeping woman. Rebolledo also argues that La Llorona is associated with Mocihuaquetzque, women who died in childbirth and who were compared to warriors. After attaining afterlife, they were Cihuapiltin 'who lay in wait at crossroads, wished epilepsy on children, and incited men to lewdness.'⁸⁵ (p. 63)

It seems that all these goddesses have each influenced the different versions of La Llorona, presenting her as a danger to children or a temptress. Although it may seem strange for Chicanas to want to reclaim these hideous and malevolent deities, one must take into account that the Aztecs stressed their negative side in order 'to suit their chauvinistic and expansionist ideology.'⁸⁶ It is also relevant, as Rostas notes, that the deities 'may not have been beautiful but they were strong', an attribute that provides an important starting point for Chicanas' revisionist enterprise.

Revising the myth of La Llorona

Before re-constructing this figure, we must understand the legend's psychological dimension and the reasons behind its popularity. La Llorona can be read as a

⁸⁴ *Borderlands*, p. 46. Anzaldúa expresses a strong alliance with this mythical figure as she believes it articulates the reality of Chicanos and of people who live in a in-between state: 'she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.' (p. 47)

⁸⁵ Cartwright Brundage also mentions that Cihuapiltins were feared because they 'brought many of men's more hideous and painful ills: palsy, harelip, clubfoot, strokes, spasms, etc.' (p. 174)

⁸⁶ Rostas, p. 380.

manifestation of the 'Terrible Mother' archetype.⁸⁷ Neumann argues that in the same way that the unconscious perceives the feminine under the archetype of the 'Great Mother', as nurturing and warm, it can also be comprehended as destructive, that is, as the 'Terrible Mother'. This unconscious archetype 'takes the form of monsters, whether in Egypt or Indian, Mexico or Etruria [...] In the myths and tales of all peoples, ages, and countries [...] witches and vampires, ghouls and spectres, assail us, all terrifying alike.'⁸⁸ Considering this, it is no surprise that comparisons have been drawn between La Llorona and other 'Terrible Mother' folk figures such as Lilith and Lamia.⁸⁹

Despite this, Chicanas attempt to decipher a message of resistance in this folk figure. For instance, Gloria Anzaldúa draws attention to her weeping:

La Llorona's wailing in the night for her lost children has an echoing note in the wailing or mourning rites performed by women as they bid their sons, brothers and husbands good-bye before they left to go to the "flowery wars". Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse. These collective wailing rites may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified the warrior and war and for whom the women of the conquered tribes were booty.⁹⁰ (p. 33)

Anzaldúa locates La Llorona in a particular historical moment thus reading her as something more than a bogeywoman. The endeavour to position this figure within the history of Mexicans and Chicanos is also pursued by José Limón, who undertakes a thorough analysis of the weeping woman. Limón argues that La Llorona is a popular figure because she stands for the loss of identity experienced by the Mexican people since colonial times to the present period. Also, he invests La

⁸⁷ See Maria Herrera-Sobek, 'The Treacherous Woman Archetype: A Structuring Agent in the Corrido', *Aztlan*, 13.1 and 13.2 (1982), 135-163 for a discussion of this icon in Mexican folklore.

⁸⁸ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother. An Analysis of the Archetype* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 148.

⁸⁹ Maria Herrera-Sobek establishes a connection between La Llorona and these two figures, as well as with the Native American folk figure 'Pskegdemus', a spirit that lures men and children. See 'Prose Narrative', in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art*, pp. 226-35. Marina Warner explains that 'in Judaith myth, the succubus Lilith was believed to haunt cradles of newborn infants to carry them off, and the classical Lamia was a childstealer as well as a bloodsucker.' 'Monstrous Mothers: Women Over Top', in *Six Myths of Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 1-16 (p. 7).

⁹⁰ Rostas argues that that during the Aztec times, 'the flower wars were ceremonial battles between neighbouring states, expressly fought to provide prisoners, which in the final years of the Empire were sacrificed in ever increasing numbers.' (p. 369)

Llorona and especially the infanticide, with a contestatory as well as redemptive significance:

The infanticide [is] the humanly understandable, if extreme and morally incorrect, reaction of a woman to sexual and familial betrayal by a man in a Mexican cultural context where such betrayal was a common and recurrent experience for women. In this act La Llorona is violating patriarchal norms, but not in any obvious superficial way which would make her a "moral" example to women. She kills because she is also living out the most extreme articulation of the everyday social and psychological contradictions created by those norms for Mexican women. To this extent, it is here that the legend poses a more fundamental oppositional threat to men because by her act she symbolically destroys the familial basis for patriarchy. [...]

We must remember the most often neglected motif in this legend, namely that she also continues to search for her children near a body of water which, if I may take Freud as my authority in this feminist analysis is, in folklore, intimately associated with birth. As such, I submit that La Llorona offers us a fascinating paradox: the symbolic destruction of the nuclear family at one stage, and the later possible restoration of her maternal bonds from the waters of rebirth as a second stage. I would also add that it points to the interesting image of restored world of love in which men [...] are absent.⁹¹

By focusing on the water motif rather than on figure of the murderous woman, Limón reads the drowning as an act that will allow her to start a new life with her children without the betraying father. Her infanticide is also invested with a more positive significance as it is construed as an act of defiance against patriarchy, rather than the mere result of madness.

Another Chicano/a researcher who interprets La Llorona as a contestatory figure is Cordelia Candelaria in her essay 'Letting La Llorona Go, or Re/reading History's 'Tender Mercies''. By locating the weeping woman within a set of literary and mythological female icons such as Toni Morrison's Sethe and Antigone⁹² who are construed as 'resisting wom[en]', Candelaria re-reads the Mexican icon as a heroine:

⁹¹ Limón, 'La Llorona, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious', p. 416.

⁹² In Greek mythology, Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, king of Thebes. After he died, his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices fought over the throne of Thebes. Eteocles obtained the power, but Polynices led an expedition to overthrow his brother, which resulted in the death of both. Polynices was denied a burial for being a traitor and Antigone buried him. Creon, the new king, condemned her to be buried alive and Antigone hanged herself. 'Antigone', in *Encarta Encyclopedia 99* [on CD-ROM]

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe kills her child in order to prevent her a life of slavery.

[...] La Llorona legend survives as potent folk nourishment because it re/presents a hero who bravely exercises her active agency in order to will her own destiny by electing a tragic fate rather than passively allowing herself and her children to live under inescapable tyranny.⁹³

This re-articulation of La Llorona as a resistant icon is reminiscent of the revision undergone by another deviant mother, Medea. In Greek mythology, Medea is the daughter of the king of Colchis who she helps Jason to obtain the Golden Fleece. Jason takes Medea back to Greece with him where they have children. Despite having helped him obtain the fleece with her magic and bearing his children, Jason betrays Medea by falling in love with the daughter of Creon of Corinth. In revenge, Medea kills their children.⁹⁴ In her discussion of the different variations of the legend, Shelley P. Haley remarks that Medea was (as La Llorona) a foreigner in relation to her partner and community. Her infanticide, argues Haley, allows her to 'assert[] her individuality and define[] herself in her resistance to Greek societal expectations.'⁹⁵ Haley, similarly to Candelaria, interprets infanticide as a woman's desperate resort to claim her agency in a patriarchal society.

Representing La Llorona in Chicano/a writing

Being an important female figure from Mexican/Chicano folklore, La Llorona is a recurrent symbol in Chicano/a literature. Even though this mythical icon is mostly used by Chicana writers, male writers also integrate it in their work. Rudolfo Anaya dedicates a book to this legend and references to her appear in his famous novel *Bless Me, Ultima*. Alurista devotes a poem to this figure in 'must be the season of the witch' where La Llorona is posited as a mother who laments the assimilation and lack of cultural memory of her children, the Chicanos:

⁹³ Cordelia Candelaria, 'Letting La Llorona Go, or Re/reading History's "Tender Mercies"', in *Literatura Chicana 1965-1995. An Anthology in Spanish, English and Caló*, ed. by Manuel de Jesús Hernández Gutiérrez and David William Foster (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp. 93-97 (p. 97).

⁹⁴ 'Medea', in *Encarta Encyclopedia 99* [CD-ROM].

⁹⁵ Shelley P. Haley, 'Self-Definition, Community and Resistance. Euripides's "Medea" and Toni Morrison's "Beloved"', *Thamyris*, 2.2 (1995), 177-206 (p. 181).

[...] She lost her children
 And she cries
 En las barrancas of industry
 Her children
 Devoured by computers
 And the gears
 Must be the season of the witch
 I hear huesos crack
 In pain
 Y lloros
 La bruja pangs
 Sus hijos han olvidado
 La magia de Durango
 Y la de Moctezuma [...].⁹⁶

Discussing the articulation of this figure in the work of writers such as Alejandro Morales or Alurista, María Herrera-Sobek argues that La Llorona 'becomes a symbolic figure representing the Chicano's feeling of alienation and loss of identity.'⁹⁷ Although this argument also applies to the writing of Chicanas, I believe their re-construction must also be read as an attempt to destabilize the patriarchal construction of the legend.

Although in Chicana writing, the weeping woman tends to be invested with an empowering significance, writers like Cordelia Candelaria reject her, envisioning this figure as a negative archetype that endorses the submission of Chicanas:

Get lost! ¡Andale! [come on!]
 Far away and forever! [go away] ¡Vete! [...]
 And my mother.
 Married forever in sickness and in sickness
 Till death parts them in sickness
 And in loudness
 at midnight, in beatings and blood
 And weeping children and everyone big
 Drunk and endings of kisses happily forever
 Sickness, befitting the passionate prelude.
 Go!
 Follow your babies llorando
 Into the rolling water del río
 Let them stare you clear-eyed into Hell.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Alurista, *Floriscanto* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 26.

⁹⁷ María Herrera-Sobek, 'Prose Narrative', p. 228. See also Robert Franklin Gish, 'La Llorona, Magic Realism, and the Frontier', in *Beyond Bounds. Cross-Cultural Essays on Anglo, American Indian, and Chicano Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 110-27.

⁹⁸ Cordelia Candelaria, 'Go 'Way from My Window, La Llorona (1)', in *Infinite Divisions*, pp. 215-16.

One of the paths chosen by Anzaldúa in her reconstruction of La Llorona is children's stories. In her bilingual book *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y La Llorona*⁹⁹, La Llorona is not depicted as a malevolent figure but as a ghost that helps the protagonist, Prietita, to find the herbs that will allow her mother to be nursed back to health. In an interview, Anzaldúa expresses her endeavour to make available to children their culture:

I also want Chicano kids to hear stuff about La Llorona, about the border, et cetera, as early as possible. [...] I think it is very important that they get to know their culture already as children. Here in California I met a lot of young Chicanos and Chicanas who didn't have a clue about their own Chicano culture.¹⁰⁰

Presenting La Llorona as a benevolent woman entails breaking the transmission of a tale that depicts this figure as treacherous.¹⁰¹

The indigenous side of La Llorona

A significant approach at re-visioning La Llorona involves recuperating her indigenous aspect. Although European and Aztec influences have shaped this icon, Chicanas tend to focus on the indigenous aspect of it. This attitude is adopted by Ana Castillo in her novel *So Far from God*, as she draws attention to the indigenous goddesses this folk figure is associated with. Set in New Mexico, this novel deals with the misfortunes that befall Sofia and her four daughters. Sofia sees her daughters die one by one, either because of AIDS, war or exposure to dangerous chemicals. Sofia ends up a child-less mother but unlike the folk figure, she is not responsible for her daughters' death.

In a passage from the book, La Loca, one of the daughters who possesses magical powers, receives a visit from the ghost of La Llorona, who informs her that

⁹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Prietita and the Ghost Woman. Prietita y La Llorona* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1995)

¹⁰⁰ Karin Rosa Ika, 'Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa', in *Chicana Ways: Conversations with Ten Chicana Writers* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002), pp. 1-24 (p. 9).

¹⁰¹ There is a recent trend in Chicana literature to write children's books for Latinos/Chicanos, which tend to be published bilingually. Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora and Gloria Anzaldúa are some of the writers dedicated to this.

her sister Esperanza is dead. Esperanza had disappeared whilst being a news reporter in the Gulf War but uncertainty remained regarding whether she was dead or alive. A week later Sofia receives official confirmation of Esperanza's death. This way, La Llorona is presented as a ghost that brings news from the dead to the living. When La Loca tells Sofia that 'the lady with the long white dress' (p. 159) regularly visits her, Sofia is hesitant. She had refused to tell the legend of La Llorona to her daughters since 'The idea of a wailing woman suffering throughout eternity because of God's punishment never appealed to Sofia.' (p. 160) The only way that Sofia can believe in the existence of La Llorona and accept her, is by re-reading her as an indigenous goddess. She then reasons:

The land was old and the stories were older. Just like a country changed its name, so did the names of their legends change. Once, La Llorona may have been Matlaciuatl, the goddess of the Mexica who was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Cuapipiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles and left in their place an obsidian blade, or Cihuacoatl, the patron of women who died in childbirth, who all wailed and wept and moaned in the night air. These women descended to earth on certain days which were dedicated to them to appear at crossroads, and they were fatal to children. (p. 161)

After this thinking, she concludes: 'La Llorona in the beginning (before men got in the way of it all) may have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess.' (p. 163) By displaying the empowering goddesses from which La Llorona descends, Castillo exposes the *man*-ipulation that this figure has undergone, from 'loving mother goddess' to murderous mother. In this way, Castillo invites the reader to interpret La Llorona from this perspective.

A willingness to recuperate the indigenous aspect of La Llorona is also shown in Pat Mora's poem 'Llantos de La Llorona: Warnings from the Wailer'.¹⁰² By expressing that La Llorona 'grow[s] the dagger gleaming like my nails in moonlight' (p. 76), Mora links her with Cihuacoatl, the goddess who took away babies and left an obsidian knife in the cradle. In her poem, La Llorona is given a voice and says:

¹⁰² Pat Mora, *Agua Santa/Holy Water*, pp. 74-77.

'Don't think I wail every night./ I'm a mother, not a martyr.' (p. 77), distancing herself from the passive woman she is usually seen as.

In Anzaldúa's poem 'My Black Angelos', La Llorona is posited as a ghost that wanders the night crying but also as a spirit that penetrates the poet's body and soul:

she picks the meat stuck between my teeth
with her snake tongue
sucks the smoked lint from my lungs
with her long black nails
plucks lice from my hair.

Aiiiiii aiiiiii aiiiiii
She crawls into my spine
Her eyes opening and closing,
shining under my skin in the dark
whirling my bones twirling
till they're hollow reeds.¹⁰³

La Llorona's 'snake tongue' connects her with pre-Columbian deities such as Cihuacoatl, Snake Woman and Coatlicue, Serpent Skirt. Anzaldúa portrays this figure as the inescapable dark side of her psyche, embedded deep within her self. In another section of *Borderlands*, this writer reveals that in the area where she originates from in South Texas, a woman dressed in white was believed to wander around. Some called her *la Jila* but she believes it was '*Cihuacoatl*, Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives, and antecedent of *la Llorona*. [...] [She] brings mental depression and sorrow.' (pp. 35-36) In another passage, Anzaldúa argues that *la Jila* and *Cihuacoatl* are in reality La Llorona, 'Daughter of Night, travelling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself. [...] I would like to think that she was crying for her lost children, los Chicanos/mexicanos.' (p. 38) In this passage, Anzaldúa construes La Llorona's search as Chicanos/as' search for their Mexican roots, the *lost part of themselves*.

La Llorona is also the subject of Chicana artistic expressions. In Rosa M.'s *Cihuacoatl, La Llorona*, (1996) the indigenous aspect of La Llorona is clearly

¹⁰³ Anzaldúa, 'My Black Angelos', in *Borderlands*, p. 184.

manifested.¹⁰⁴ The artwork portrays a sleeping child being taken away by the goddess Cihuacoatl, after having left an obsidian knife in the cradle. The goddess wears a skull as a necklace, emphasizing the idea that she represents death.¹⁰⁵



In the painting, La Llorona is accompanied by some animals with human faces. In an interview with Maria Herrera-Sobek, Rosa M. explains that these figures are based on 'the Colima type pottery dogs. They are stylised *escuincles* (dogs) and for me they represent the *naguales* or animal spirits.'¹⁰⁶ The fairy tale world evoked in the image is reminiscent of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Leonor Fini, painters that have exerted an important influence on the Chicana artist.¹⁰⁷ Another

¹⁰⁴ I would like to thank Rosa M. for helping me to understand the influences that have shaped this painting.

¹⁰⁵ Although Rosa M. portrays Cihuacoatl wearing a skull, Rostas states that Coatlicue had a 'pendant made of a human skull.' (p. 371)

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Maria Herrera-Sobek, 'Art and Society in Dialogue: Ethnonational Consciousness in the Art of Rosa M.', in *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions*, ed. by Maria Herrera-Sobek (Santa Barbara: University of Santa Barbara, 2000), pp. 165-84 (p. 180).

¹⁰⁷ These female artists evoke a magical and surrealist world in their work. For more information on these artists, see Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames

female painter evoked in this image is Frida Kahlo, through the reproduction of her painting *Mi nana y yo* (1937), hanging from a wall. Kahlo's image portrays a nursemaid nurturing a small Frida Kahlo, invoking the archetype of the Good Mother, or a Mother Goddess.¹⁰⁸ Another Mexican cultural icon is present in the artwork since a small image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears on the mechanical-looking cockerel. In an e-mail letter, Rosa M. has explained that in her work, *La Llorona* is sometimes a wounded spirit whose tears and breast milk nurture the planet, but that in other occasions, she represents 'whatever separates us (from other human beings, our children or our innocence or sense of wonder) whether it is spiritual death, assimilation, or the inevitable "growing up".' The kidnapping of a child can thus be interpreted as the loss of innocence and the entrance into adulthood. In Rosa's work, *La Llorona* evokes children's imagination and thus represents the recovery of the capacity to see the world in a magical light.

La Llorona: from abused to empowered woman

In many Chicana texts, *La Llorona* tends to be articulated as a woman who suffers physical and/or sexual abuse or who endures tragic circumstances but manages to survive. This is the case of Sofia, the protagonist of *So Far from God*, who despite losing her four daughters, is depicted as a strong and determined woman. Sofia's life mirrors that of *La Llorona*, as both end up childless. But, Sofia does not collapse into madness nor turns into a 'suffering mother'. In this way, Castillo juxtaposes the mythical woman with the existing woman, suggesting that in real life, women do *not*

and Hudson, 1985) In an e-mail, Rosa M. has explained that she wanted to include references to these artists because in the past women have been excluded from art history.

¹⁰⁸ Hayden Herrera argues that this painting suggests the image of Madonna and its child: 'De hecho, la pintura hace una clara referencia a la Madona Caritas, en la que aun cuando la Virgen amamanta a Cristo Niño, ya tiene conocimiento previo de su crucifixión. [...] Aquí la única imagen sagrada es la nodriza India, quien hace las veces de la Virgen.' (In fact, the painting clearly evokes the Madona Caritas, in which the Virgin that nurtures the Christ Child already knows of his future crucifixion. Here, the only sacred image is that of the wet nurse, who represents the Virgin.) In *Frida Kahlo: las pinturas*, (México D.F.: Editorial Diana, 1994), p. 12.

follow the example of La Llorona. This is revealed in a passage from the novel, where Sofia is compared with the mythical woman, exposing the lack of correlation between them. Sofia has been abandoned by her husband but:

[she] had not left her children, much less drowned them to run off with nobody. On the contrary, she had been left to raise them by herself. And all her life, there had always been at least one woman around her, left alone, abandoned, divorced, or widowed, to raise her children, and none of them had ever tried to kill their babies. (p. 161)

Sofia not only represents an alternative to La Llorona when she is left by her husband, but also when all her daughters die. Instead of spending the rest of her life lamenting her loss, she sets up an organization that celebrates the (martyred) life of her daughters and that encourages a discussion of Latinas' oppression.¹⁰⁹ Castillo recreates a new version of La Llorona that challenges the idea of abandoned women as malicious and vindictive.

Gloria Anzaldúa's short story 'Ghost Trap' (1992) also reconstructs La Llorona as a strong woman. The story begins by expressing the grief of a recently widowed woman: 'She had thrown herself into the grave on top of his coffin wailing like *la llorona*, the ghost woman who wandered in the dark. [...] She would walk from room to room at night feeling like a ghost.'¹¹⁰ But two weeks later, the dead husband returns as a ghost, demanding to be served. The widow has to cook and attend to his needs as when he was alive. Realizing 'her two-week-old *vida* was no longer her own and want[ing] it back' (p. 41), the widow decides to get rid of it. She sets a trap which consists of a 'little model of a house with Popsicle sticks', hoping the ghost will mistaken it for his house. With the ghost trapped inside, she puts the miniature house under her bed, but during the night he tries to get into the bed with her:

Half dreaming, half awake, she pushed him away, but he kept climbing on top of her. All night she refused to open her legs to him.

¹⁰⁹ Domino Renee Perez argues that Sofia is not the only character that symbolizes La Llorona. She sees each one of her daughters as representations of La Llorona. See 'Crossing Mythological Borders. Revisioning La Llorona in Contemporary Fiction', *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, 16.1 (1999), 49-54.

¹¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Ghost Trap', in *New Chicana/Chicano Writing*, ed. by Charles M. Tatum (Tucson and London: University of Arizona Press, 1992), pp. 40-42 (p. 40).

Next morning she woke with deep grooves down the corners of her mouth and bruises on her mouth, breasts, arms, and inner thighs. (p. 42)

This passage suggests that not only has the protagonist been sexually abused the previous night but also throughout her marriage. Refusing to carry on with such abuse, the widow commits herself to get rid of him using a vacuum cleaner and an iron. The story ends with her waiting in bed with these utensils, whispering 'Come on *cabrón*, *vente chingón*' (p. 42).

The legend of the weeping woman is evoked at the beginning of the story, leading the reader to expect a woman who will remain a passive character throughout the narrative. But, this *llorona* turns into an active agent as she refuses to endure a life of abuse. In Anzaldúa's rendering, La Llorona, as in the siren-type variant, attacks a man but this time the aim is to end her suffering. The Chicana writer reverses the roles normally given to the male and female characters: the malevolent character is not La Llorona but her husband. This story subverts the patriarchal dimension of the legend by presenting an empowered *llorona* who puts an end to the abuse she suffers.¹¹¹

Helena María Viramontes's short story 'The Cariboo Café' (1985) incorporates issues of violence and oppression into her re-articulation of the legendary woman.¹¹² Although this text has been previously discussed in Chicano/a critical writing, I want to expand on an interesting point made by José David Saldívar.¹¹³ In his analysis of 'The Cariboo Café', this critic draws attention to the way in which liminality is manifested in the text, especially in connection to a La Llorona subtext.

¹¹¹ See also Hub. Hermans, 'La presencia de la llorona en algunos cuento chicanos', in *Foro Hispánico* 9, ed. by Hermans and Lasarte, pp. 63-80 for a discussion of this short story.

¹¹² Helena María Viramontes, 'The Cariboo Café' in *The Moths and Other Stories* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), pp. 61-75.

¹¹³ Other critics that analyse this text are: Ivonne Gordon Vailakis, 'Wailing as a Mode of Blurring Boundaries in Helena María Viramontes' "The Cariboo Café"', in *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions*, pp. 93-109; Wendy Swyt, 'Hungry Women: Borderlands Mythos in Two Stories by Helena María Viramontes', *MELUS*, 23:2 (1998), 189-201; Debra Castillo, *Talking Back: Towards a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997); Sonia Saldívar-Hull 'Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics', in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, pp. 203-20.

The Cariboo Café is the place where the protagonists of this text, two illegal immigrant children and an illegal immigrant washerwoman, meet. The two children, Macky and Sonya, have not only misplaced the key of their apartment but have also become lost. Because of their illegal status, their parents have warned them to avoid the police and *La Migra* (Immigration and Naturalisation Services): 'The polie is men in black who gets kids and send them to Tijuana, says Popi. Whenever you see them, run, because they hate you, says Popi.'¹¹⁴ (p. 63) Lost in a city with a 'maze of allies and dead ends, the long abandoned warehouses shadowing any light' (p. 63), and unable to turn to the authorities, Macky and Sonya enter the Cariboo Café. This place is described as 'the zero zero place' as 'the paint's peeled off' cept for the two O's' (p. 64). There, they encounter another dislocated individual, a nameless washerwoman from a Central American country who has entered the United States illegally, escaping the violence of a civil war. The washerwoman is traumatised by the murder of her five year-old son Geraldo by the guerrillas. The refugee woman has had doubts whether to leave her country as 'Geraldo will not have a home to return to, no mother to cradle his nightmares away, soothe the scars, stop the haemorrhaging of his heart' (p. 71), suggesting that she cannot come to terms with her loss. But in the café, she is finally reunited with him, as she believes the lost child, Macky, to be her dead son. The refugee woman brings the children to her house and takes care of them, but the following day they return to the Cariboo café. When the police, alerted by the cafe's owner, arrive, the washerwoman grabs Macky and refuses to release him:

[...] she crushes Geraldo against her, so tight, as if she wants to conceal him in her body again, return him to her belly so that they will not castrate him and hang his small, blue penis on her door, not crush his face so that he is unrecognisable, not bury him among the heaps of bones, and ears, and teeth, and jaws [...]. (p. 74)

¹¹⁴ *La Migra* can also be decoded as another bogeyman figure as it takes illegal children away from their parents.

Refusing to let the child go, the refugee woman is shot. However, this death is not posited as a violent end to her existence, but the beginning of a new life with her son, as she says: ' [...] we are going home. My son and I' (p. 75)

Viramontes invites the reader to interpret the washerwoman as La Llorona by making a reference to this archetypal figure. When recounting the death of her son Geraldo, the mythical woman is introduced in the narrative: 'It is the night of La Llorona. The women come up from the depths of sorrow to search for their children. I join them, frantic, desperate [...]. I hear the wailing of the women and know it to be my own. Geraldo is nowhere to be found.' (pp. 68-69) In the text, La Llorona stands for all women who have lost their children to violent systems of oppression.¹¹⁵ The washerwoman's liminality is double, for she is not only a *llorona* searching for her lost child, but also an illegal immigrant. Saldivar, basing his argument on Leo Chávez's work regarding illegal immigration and Victor W. Turner's discussion of ritualistic passages, states that illegal immigrants go through separation (from mother country) and liminality but reincorporation into society is denied them. According to Saldivar, liminality is a permanent state for illegal migrants:

But why does Viramontes represent the U.S.-Mexico border limen in "The Cariboo Cafe" as position and not as threshold? The reasons for this are complex, but one is that the washerwoman, like the majority of undocumented migrants in the United States, never acquires what Chávez calls the "links of incorporation – secure employment, family formation, the establishment of credit, capital accumulation, competency in English" that will allow her to come into full cultural and legal citizenship [...].¹¹⁶

By constructing the refugee woman as a liminal character, Viramontes draws attention to an aspect of the La Llorona legend that tends to be ignored. By not being granted entrance into Heaven, La Llorona is ordered by God to roam the earth

¹¹⁵ Yvonne Gordon Vailakis makes an interesting point by presenting a parallelism between the washerwoman and another character in the story, the cook and owner of the cafe. The cook has also lost his son, but in his case, it was during the Vietnam War. The cook is described as bitter and angered by his loss but he is nice to Macky, possibly because he reminds him of his own son. Vailakis argues, that despite these commonalities, the cook 'views the Salvadoran woman as a strange human being. The author makes him speak in a racist manner. There is no doubt that at an unconscious level, he too feels displaced; that he is left with nothing but his café full of strangers. [...] He reflects the feelings of a society filled with prejudice.' (pp. 104-05)

¹¹⁶ José David Saldivar, *Border Matters. Remapping American Cultural Studies* (London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 99.

looking for her children. Her search and her state of limbo are thus infinite. However, in Viramontes's story, the refugee woman, who is also looking for her child, finally finds him (or believes she has found him). Hence, Viramontes re-writes the legend of La Llorona, allowing her to re-form her family and to end her liminal status. Following Saldivar's line of thought, her liminal, illegal status is also ceased by her death and her symbolic return to the family.¹¹⁷

Like *So Far From God*, Viramontes reconstructs La Llorona as a woman who has lost her child to patriarchal systems of oppression.¹¹⁸ Viramontes, as Castillo had before her, constructs a more positive ending for her *version*, allowing her to find peace and sparing her an existence of madness and wailing. 'The Cariboo Cafe' emphasizes the liminal aspect of the weeping woman, suggesting that this is a recurring figure in Chicana writing because Chicanas see their *in-between* identity and existence mirrored in this mythical figure.

Sandra Cisneros' 'Woman Hollering Creek' also deals with an abused woman whilst providing an alternative to the traditional representation of La Llorona. This short story narrates the experiences of Cleófilas, a Mexican woman who marries Juan Pedro and migrates to the United States. She has high hopes for her new life in Texas, looking forward to wearing 'outfits like the women on the *tele*'.¹¹⁹ Unfortunately she finds a monotonous existence punctuated by an aggressive husband who beats her up. Cleófilas feels trapped in this Texan town: 'Nothing one could walk to, at any rate. Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home.' (p. 51) She does however feel fascinated by the name of the creek behind her house, 'Woman Hollering':

¹¹⁷ This interpretation is also linked with José Limón's analysis of the myth as he argues that by drowning the children in water, a symbol of rebirth, La Llorona is capable of re-forming her family, without the presence of the betraying father.

¹¹⁸ The washerwoman remains nameless throughout the whole story, thus representing all the women who have lost children in similar violent circumstances.

¹¹⁹ Sandra Cisneros, 'Woman Hollering Creek', in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, pp. 43-56 (p. 45).

La Gritona. [...] Though no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain. [...] a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood. [...] who knows, the townspeople shrugged, because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name. (p. 46)

Cleófilas wonders whether the creek was named after La Llorona, 'who drowned her own children' (p. 51) and which was the name of the creek before 'it turned English' (p. 47). Pregnant with her second child, she visits the health centre where a worker, realising the continuing abuse suffered by Cleófilas, decides to help her. The worker arranges for a woman called Felice to help Cleófilas escape from her husband and drive her to the bus station where she will be able to catch a coach back to Mexico. Whilst crossing the creek on the way to the bus station, Felice 'let out a yell as loud as any mariachi.' (p. 55) Felice explains that

Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler. She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed. [...] That's why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right? (p. 55)

Felice does not interpret the word 'hollering' as wailing but rather as an empowering, liberating act. For Felice, 'hollering' is connected with powerful and courageous icons such as Tarzan, not with a mythical weeping woman. Cisneros is not the only writer who deciphers a message of empowerment in La Llorona's holler. In an interview, Anzaldúa says that the figure of La Llorona 'empowered me to yell out, to scream out, to break out of silence.'¹²⁰

Cleófilas is not only stunned by Felice's yell but also by the fact that this woman drives her own vehicle: 'she herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it.' (p. 55) The text establishes a parallelism between not only Cleófilas and Felice, but also between the different ways in which they interpret the same legend. The text implies that the presence of empowering female role models such as 'the hollering woman' in Felice's life has played an important function in her development as a strong, independent woman. In contrast, Cleófilas has been subjected to role models

¹²⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, 'Doing Gigs. Speaking, Writing, and Change. An Interview with Debbie Blake and Carmen Abrego (1994)', in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, pp. 211-33 (p. 229).

like the weeping woman, who have pressurized her into being a submissive wife. In an interview, Cisneros discusses the different ways in which the two women construe the same myth:

[...] the Chicana woman [...] could understand the myth in a new way. She could see it as a grito [yell], not a llanto [weeping]. And all of a sudden, that woman who came with all her Mexican assumptions learned something. The Chicana woman showed her a new way of looking at a Mexican myth. And it took someone who was a little bit outside the culture to see the myth in a new way.¹²¹

La Llorona has been a role model both for Cleófilas and Felice, but they have each interpreted her differently. The author thereby demonstrates how the interpretation of mythical figures and role models has an impact on one's life. Similarly to the idea conveyed in her re-construction of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Cisneros is implying that figures such as La Llorona should provide a positive, empowering message for Chicanas.¹²²

The real bogeymen/women

The revitalization of La Llorona myth is also approached from a comic perspective. The great attention received by this figure is mocked by the theatrical group Culture Clash. Poking fun at the feminist-oriented interpretations of this legend, the group argue in their play 'A Bowl of Beings' that

[...] now that I'm a feminist, I understand that La Llorona was simply a victim of her abusive husband, El Coocui. [...] But there is documentary proof that El Coocui and La Llorona did seek out a marriage counselor to help pull their marriage back together again.¹²³

A humorous approach is also adopted by Monica Palacios who presents an original reconstruction of the Llorona legend by narrating it from a lesbian point of

¹²¹ Reed Way, 'Interview with Sandra Cisneros', p. 294.

¹²² For a further discussion of this short story, see also María Herrera-Sobek 'Transformaciones culturales: la tradición oral mexicana y la literatura de escritoras chicanas', in *Foro Hispánico*, pp. 53-61, and Harryette Mullen ' "A Silence between us like a Language": The Untranslatability of Experience on Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*'.

Other texts that deal with La Llorona are: Silvia Gonzalez's play *La Llorona llora* (unpublished manuscript); Naomi Quiñonez's poem 'La Llorona' in *Infinite Division*, pp.218-9; Alma Luz Villanueva's short story 'La Llorona/Weeping Woman', in *Weeping Woman. La Llorona and Other Stories* (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1994), pp.1-7.

¹²³ Culture Clash, 'A Bowl of Beings', in *Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy*, pp. 56-106.

view.¹²⁴ In 1990, it was part of *Lesbian Bed Time Stories 2* whilst a year later it was included in an anthology that examines lesbianism from a racial perspective: *Chicana Lesbians: the Girls our Mothers Warned us about*, edited by Carla Trujillo.¹²⁵ The narrator begins by stating that the story she has always been told dealt with a woman who drowned her children, “apparently she woke up on the wrong side of the bed – a little pissed off ...”¹²⁶ Fascinated by the tale, the narrator explains that s/he discovered the ‘Llorona Loca Archives at UCLA’, where s/he found a different version. This unknown tale narrates the story of Caliente, a beautiful woman who despite obtaining much male attention, was never seen with a man, ‘there was something different about her.’ (p. 49) The whole town gossiped about her until one day La Stranger arrived. After winning her over, they both leave the town. They even get married by a curandera and lead a happy life together. However, one day La Stranger takes Caliente to the bank of the river to confess that she has been unfaithful to her: “‘Mi reina, every Wednesday during the last six months, while you were at your “Latina: I am Woman - You are Scum,” support group, I was having an affair with – with – Trixie!’ (p. 50) In a fit of rage, Caliente drowns her partner in the river but after realizing what she has done, she faints into the river and dies.¹²⁷ From that moment, the ghost of Caliente is heard crying every night ‘searching, crying desperately for La Stranger. Her crying was so hysterical, everyone began to call her La Llorona Loca – the crazy crier.’ (p. 51)

¹²⁴ It is no coincidence that both Cultural Clash and Monica Palacios approach this myth in a similar way. In the past, Palacios has worked in comedy with this group.

¹²⁵ Monica Palacios, ‘La Llorona Loca: The Other Side’ in *Lesbian Bed Time Stories 2*, ed. by Terry Woodrow (Willits: Tough Dove Books, 1990), pp. 173-76.

¹²⁶ Monica Palacios, ‘La Llorona Loca: The Other Side’, in *Chicana Lesbians*, ed. by Trujillo, pp. 49-51 (p. 49).

¹²⁷ Pérez argues that the mention of “‘Latina: I am Woman – You are Scum” support group’ stands for a ‘parody of a lesbian-feminist self-awareness group, for despite its intention to heighten Chicana awareness, Caliente has not learned from it enough to be aware of what is going on in her own relationship.’ In ‘Crossing Mythological Borders. Revisioning La Llorona in Contemporary Fiction’, p. 53.

This story epitomizes a recent trend in Chicana/Latina artistic expressions as noted by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano: 'the lesbianization of the heterosexual icons of popular culture.'¹²⁸ Palacios' *lesbianization* of La Llorona is reminiscent of Alma Lopez's *Lupe and Sirena* where the Virgin of Guadalupe and a siren are represented in an erotic pose, subverting the heterosexual construction of these two icons. Domino Renee Perez also discusses this story and argues that La Llorona, in the traditional legend, is already 'marginalized within the community after her abandonment and homicidal act' but in Palacios's version, her sexuality 'plac[es] her even further beyond the boundaries of the "mainstream" community.' (p. 53) In this re-writing, La Llorona is doubly marginalized, by her murderous act and her homosexuality.

By stating that this story 'never told to me' (p. 49) was found in an archive, Palacios suggests that other versions that do not posit La Llorona as heterosexual may exist and may have been hidden for this reason. Also, she insinuates her newly discovered version is as valid and authentic as other conventional renderings of the legend. By mentioning that this variant was discovered in the 'Llorona Loca Archives at UCLA', Palacios is poking fun at the recent popularity of this figure, implying that it has become a fashionable icon to include in one's writing, guaranteeing 'Chicano/a authenticity'. Thus, her unconventional version can be read as a response to this trend.

An interesting point to be drawn from this re-writing is that La Llorona's *immorality* is based not only on her murder, but also on her sexuality. Palacios manifests that lesbians are considered to be the bogeywomen of a patriarchal society. This idea is implicit in the title of the anthology in which the story was published: *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls our Mothers Warned us about*. In this volume, the

¹²⁸ Yarbro-Bejarano, 'The Lesbian Body in Latina Cultural Production', p. 182.

editor argues that 'Chicana lesbians are a threat to the community. [...] their existence disrupts the established order of male dominance, and raises the consciousness of many Chicana women regarding their own independence and control.'¹²⁹ This view becomes visible in the text as we are told that the townspeople gossip about Caliente and that she and La Stranger have to escape when they get together because 'they were being chased by many macho Mexican dudes' (p. 50) In Palacios' s story, La Llorona is not only feared because of her murder, but also because she dared to be open about her sexuality.

The idea of independent women as a menace to society is also replicated in Cisneros' poem 'Loose Woman':

They say I am a beast.
And feast on it. When all along
I thought that's what a woman was.

They say I'm a bitch.
Or witch. I've claimed
The same and never winced.

They say I'm a *macha*, hell on wheels,
Viva-la-vulva, fire and brimstone,
man-hating, devastating,
boogey-woman lesbian.
Not necessarily,
but I like the compliment. [...]

By all accounts I am
a danger to society,
I am Pancha Villa.¹³⁰

In this poem, Cisneros exposes how liberated women are believed to be the revolutionary individuals who disturb the stability of society, hence the real bogeywomen. Marina Warner offers some observations regarding this:

Feminism today has become a bogey, a whipping boy, routinely produced to explain all social ills: women's struggle for equality of choice in matters of sex, their grasp of sovereignty over their bodies, are blamed in particular for the rise in family breakdown, the increase of divorce, and the apparently spiralling delinquency and violence of children.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Carla Trujillo, 'Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community', in *Chicana Lesbians*, ed. by Trujillo, pp. 186-94 (p. 186).

¹³⁰ Cisneros, 'Loose Woman' in *Loose Woman*, (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1995), pp. 112-13.

¹³¹ Warner, 'Monstruous Mothers: Women Over the Top', pp. 3-4.

The idea of liberated women as threatening is also articulated in Anzaldúa's short story 'Ghost Trap' since La Llorona is presented as a self-assertive female who annihilates her abusive husband. Another idea deduced from these texts is that the individuals who threaten Chicanos' security are not found in woods or roaming the banks of river in distress. In texts such as *The House on Mango Street* or 'The Ghost Trap' it is not Rapunzel or La Llorona who threatens the Chicana's safety, but rather her own husband, father or male member of the community. The real bogeymen/women are not found in the woods but closer to home, or even within one's own home. Another Chicana who expresses this view very clearly is Denise Chávez. In a passage from *Face of an Angel*, Soveida and Mara, two female members of the same family recall their childhood experiences of sexual abuse by a relative:

Our ghosts were real. There was no need for the wailing Llorona or the demented Coco. Our ghosts haunted us in a way no fantastic demons ever could.
 "Dolores and Mamá Lupita were my bogeywomen, Soveida. I had my bogeyman too, hell, and he had me. Luardo would come into my room and touch me. I had nightmares that Dolores would find out. I wanted to scream. [...]"¹³²

For these female characters, bogeymen are not part of the imagination or a tool used by adults but real individuals living under the same roof. This passage implies that adults talk about bogeymen in order to avoid addressing the existent individuals who can actually harm children. As Warner claims, 'Bogeymen and women are frequently imagined as single, anomalous outsiders – the Cyclops in his cave, the witch in her gingerbread house'¹³³, not as one's father or husband.

The works analysed herein manifest very diverse approaches towards the re-articulation of children's tales. As exposed in this chapter, the revision of fairy and folk tales provides an avenue for the discussion of issues related with social justice, ethnicity and gender. González's revamp of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in*

¹³² Denise Chávez, *Face of an Angel* (New York: Warner Books, 1995), p. 52.

¹³³ *No Go Bogeyman*, p. 28.

Wonderland exposes that concepts such as home, believed to be unambiguous, can be complex notions for minority groups. In these literary re-articulations, the figure of the bogeyman or witch becomes central, as it allows the writers to expound on the real fears and threats of Chicanas. Many of the revisions suggest that the narrative presented is more faithful to the original version than the traditional one. As Diane Purkiss argues, 'By rewriting the myth [...] [you] are also [...] recovering the dark, secret, always unconscious truths which the fathers have struggled to repress.'¹³⁴ Thus, writers like Palacios imply that La Llorona was not punished for her infanticide, but for her sexuality and independent spirit. This idea is also manifested in the rewriting of 'Little Red Riding Hood' where the sexual connotations of the tale become distinct once the story is situated in an underprivileged, Latino/a environment.

The revision of the figure of La Llorona also entails a revision of the Mexican/Chicano culture from which it emerges. The reconfiguration of this figure must be seen alongside the repositioning of other female archetypes such as La Malinche, and Virgin of Guadalupe, which have been traditionally trapped within the virgin/whore dichotomy. When talking about these female icons, Anzaldúa explains that 'ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three "Our Mothers."' (p. 31) The ambiguity of this figure allows Chicanas to display different aspects of her, articulating her as a multifaceted icon, rather than simply as a treacherous or mad woman.

In Chicana writing, La Llorona ceases to be a murderous mother and begins to represent very diverse aspects of Chicanos/as' realities: loss of cultural memory, loss of innocence, abused women, search for freedom ... Chicana writers also place attention on elements of the story that tend to be ignored, such as the wailing, water

¹³⁴ Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting the Myth', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, pp. 441-57 (p. 444).

and liminal status. Thus, these elements are invested with a new significance that allow the articulation of La Llorona as an empowering icon. By re-creating versions of the tale where she is posited as a positive role model, Chicana writers are promoting the transmission of Llorona stories that defy the patriarchal message of the traditional tale(s). Hence, these revisionist texts can be read as the beginning of the transmission of new Llorona tales.

Chapter 4: Telenovelas, Wrestlers and Prostitutes: The Meaning of Mexican Popular Culture.

'Mexican immigrants maintain their main connection with that marvellous, imaginary country called Mexico via soap operas.'¹

The representation of Mexican popular culture is currently the focus of much Chicano/a writing. Although some expressions of popular culture, such as the *telenovela*, are depicted as merely manipulative, others, such as wrestling, are articulated as resistant to the dominant ideology. The writers discussed herein, John Rechy, María Amparo Escandón and Sandra Cisneros, place emphasis on the transnational dimension of certain practices, suggesting that they allow the receiver of these art forms to assert his/her cultural identity within the U.S. The texts analysed below reveal very different views on popular cultural expressions. In some instances, examples of popular culture are negatively represented as they support patriarchy and encourage women to remain passive. Attention will be paid to those texts which reject one-dimensional representations of popular cultural forms and which invite the reader to construe them as subversive.

We must begin with a definition of popular culture and its specific manifestations within Latin America, in particular Mexico. Although theorists differ in their definitions of popular culture, they all agree that this term is ambiguous and difficult to define. In their introduction to *Popular Culture in Latin America*, the editors, William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy describe this term as 'the set of images, practices, and interactions that distinguishes a community and often serves as a synonym for national identity.'² They simply outline the term in the sense of 'everyday culture' (p. xi) and argue that 'it has served throughout Latin America as a means to display identity [...].' (p. xii) Despite stating that popular culture is

¹ Gómez-Peña, '1995 – Terreno Peligrosos', p. 133.

² William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio, 'Introduction', in *Latin American Popular Culture. An Introduction* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2000), pp. xi-xxiii (p. xi).

'problematic to define', William Rowe and Vivian Schelling are more specific as they identify it in 'the immediate reality of such things as *telenovelas*, salsa, carnivals, folk music, magical beliefs, and oral narratives – all conveying the idea of popular as a distinct sphere.'³ These critics argue that popular culture is a key force in the creation of Latin American modernity: 'Latin American modernity is not a replica of US or European mass culture [...]. A major factor in its difference – probably the major factor – is the force of popular culture.' (p. 3) Colin MacCabe sees a political dimension within popular culture as it 'originat[es] from within working-class culture and [...] oppos[es] dominant bourgeois culture.'⁴ Difficulties also arise when differentiating mass culture from popular culture. Rowe and Schelling expand: '[mass culture] has been taken by some to spell the end of any genuinely popular culture and by others to be the only form that popular culture can take in the twentieth century.' (p. 7) Jean Franco also expresses difficulty in separating these two areas, as popular culture is said by some to be demarcated by the market, and by others, to be 'emancipatory and revolutionary in contrast to oppressive mass culture.'⁵ My approach focuses on the different messages that can be communicated by different popular culture forms.⁶ Thus, I call attention to the subversive aspect of popular culture, following Ana López's line of thought who suggests 'to conceive of these texts of popular culture as possible sites of hegemonic resistance and to rethink the concept of the dominant as a possible vehicle for

³ William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity. Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 2.

⁴ Colin MacCabe, 'Defining Popular Culture', in *High Theory/Low Culture. Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. by Colin MacCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).

⁵ Jean Franco, 'What's in a name? Popular Culture Theories and Their Limitations', in *Critical Passions. Selected Essays*, ed. by Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 169-80 (p. 170).

⁶ Rowe and Schelling maintain in their introduction that they have not considered in their work 'the highly significant phenomenon of border culture, where migrants to the USA elaborate inventive responses to their experience [...]' (p. 13) This aspect of popular culture is considered in my analysis.

cultural contestation.⁷ I interpret popular culture as the 'everyday culture' that has the capacity to reflect the social and cultural characteristics of a group. In my work, the boundaries between popular culture and mass culture are practically non-existent as nowadays, technology plays an important role in the transmission of the former. I perceive popular culture as a multi-dimensional form, with a capacity to sustain the hegemony but also, most importantly, with the potential of becoming a site of contestation. My analysis of popular culture places emphasis on the end user, arguing that who interprets the form and the aim of its use have an impact on the signification of the form.

Telenovelas: degrading or empowering?

An important form of Mexican popular culture is the *telenovela*, the soap opera. *Telenovelas* are discussed in many Chicano/a texts, indicating that they are a significant part of Chicanos/as' daily lives. Possibly because of their mass cultural status, *telenovelas* have not been granted sufficient critical attention within the context of Chicano/a cultural studies. My analysis of this art form in three literary texts will reveal that they have a greater implication than previously thought. In Chicano/a writing, *telenovelas* are posited as an important part of Chicanos/as' transnational identity, suggesting that this genre should be perceived as something more than a television serial.

To describe a *telenovela* as simply the Latin American equivalent of the soap opera does not reflect the socio-political and cultural significance of this melodramatic art form. According to Ana M. López, *telenovelas* 'are the basic staple of all Latin American TV programming (day- and prime-time), of Spanish-language

⁷ Ana López, 'The Melodrama in Latin America. Films, Telenovelas and the Currency of a Popular Form', *Wide Angle*, 7 (1985), 4-13 (pp. 12-13).

programming in the US [...].⁸ Rowe, Schelling and Martin-Barbero trace the origins of the *telenovela* to the 19th century melodramatic forms of the theatre and the newspaper serial. The *folletín*, or newspaper serial consisted of a 'story written in episodes and series. The "open structure" of a tale written day-to-day, carried out according to a plan but open to the influence of its readers' reaction, propitiated the (con)fusion of fiction and life.'⁹ According to Rowe and Schelling, 'folktales, Brazilian *cordel* literature, and the chronicle of events in corrido and Colombian *vallenato* songs' (p. 109) are also linked with the birth of the *telenovela*. Latin American, and especially Mexican, melodramatic cinema also played an important role in its formation. Carlos Monsiváis states: 'Lo que el cine inicia la televisión lo finiquita. El melodrama clásico conoce su metamorfosis terminal en telenovelas, radionovelas y fotonovelas.'¹⁰ So what happens in the *telenovelas*? Monsiváis puts it simply and accurately in two words: 'Exceso y grand-guñol.'¹¹ (excess and grand-guignol) In contrast to the soap operas in Britain and U.S., *telenovelas* usually only run for a few months and have a definite ending. Although there exist stylistic differences between for instance a Mexican and a Venezuelan *telenovela*, they all tend to contain unrealistic plots and excessive drama.¹² Expanding on Mexican *telenovelas*, Monsiváis discusses the type of plots they usually deal with:

⁸ Ana M. López, 'Our Welcomed guests. Telenovelas in Latin America', in *To Be Continued. Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. by Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 256-75 (p. 256).

⁹ Jesús Martín-Barbero, 'Memory and Form in the Latin American soap opera', in *To Be Continued*, pp. 276-84 (p. 277).

¹⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, 'Se sufre pero se aprende. (El melodrama y las reglas de la falta de límites)', *Archivos de la filmoteca*, (February 1994), 7-19 (p.16) 'what the cinema begins, television finishes off. The classic melodrama finds its final metamorphosis in telenovelas, radio serials and romances.' Lorenzo Vilches argues that not only the Mexican, Brazilian or Argentinean cinema have influenced the *telenovela* but also the filmic work of Rossellini and Godard. 'La fuerza de los sentimientos', in *Telenovela. Ficción popular y mutaciones populares*, ed. by Eliseo Verón and Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel (Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, 1997), pp. 51-62.

¹¹ 'Se sufre pero se aprende', p. 18.

¹² Ana López states that 'Mexican telenovelas are notorious for their weepiness, extraordinarily Manichean vision of the world, and lack of specific historical referents. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Brazilian telenovelas are luxurious, exploit cinematic production values, and are considered more 'realistic' for their depiction of ambiguous and divided characters in contemporary (or specific historical) Brazilian contexts.' In 'Our Welcomed Guests', p. 261.

De variantes de la Cenicienta y de Blanca Nieves, [...] de la joven que llegó a la ciudad pobre y descalza y se vuelve rica y famosa, del joven a quien le insinúan que su madre podría ser negra o podría no haberlo concebido, de la hechicera que regresa cuatro siglos después de vengarse y se enamora de un descendiente de sus inquisidores [...].¹³ (p. 13)

An interesting aspect of *telenovelas* is the capacity for export, not only within Latin America but also to countries like the United States, Spain, Italy, France, Russia or China.¹⁴ This ensures that *telenovelas* nowadays represent around the world not only Latin American television but a Latin American identity. Martín-Barbero argues that *telenovelas* play an important role 'in the production and reproduction of the images Latin American peoples make of themselves [...].'(p. 281) Jorge González expresses the *telenovela*'s significance in no uncertain terms:

[*telenovelas*] are together with the Boom writers, the most current and vital cultural product that Latin Americans countries export to the world and share among themselves. [...] [It] is particularly important for studying those "cultural matrices" which make up much of Latin America collective identity [...].¹⁵

The fact that a Mexican *telenovela* can be watched across the whole of Latin American leads to the creation of a pan-Latin American identity. But as noted by López and Martín-Barbero this also means that specific national qualities have to be softened in favour of a more exportable product:

Soap opera production has meant, in turn, a certain appropriation of the genre by each country, that is, its nationalization. On the other hand, [it] implies rigid stereotypes in its dramatic outline and strong conditioning elements in its visual grammar, as required and reinforced by the logic of a market with increasingly transnational tendencies.¹⁶

The exportability of *telenovelas* becomes obvious in the U.S. market where there exists a substantial Latino/a audience. Elizabeth Fox claims that as early as the 1960s 'Televisa's owners bought TV stations in Texas, California and New York

¹³ 'Variants of Cinderella and Snow White, [...] [they deal with] the young woman who arrives in the city poor and barefoot, and becomes rich and famous, the young man to whom it is suggested that his mother could be black or could not have given birth to him, the sorcerer that returns four centuries later in order to obtain revenge but falls in love with the descendant of her inquisitors [...].'

¹⁴ See Kate Baldwin's article on the success of a 1970s Mexican *telenovela* in Russia during the 1990s. 'Montezuma's Revenge. Reading *Los Ricos También Lloran* in Russia', in *To Be Continued*, pp. 285-300.

¹⁵ Jorge A. González, 'The Cofraternity of (Un)Finishable Emotions: Constructing Mexican Telenovelas', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 11 (1992), 59-92 (p.60).

¹⁶ Jesús Martín-Barbero, p. 282.

According to Ana López, the main countries that create *telenovelas* are Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela, being TV-Globo (Brazil) and Televisa (Mexico) two of the main producers. See both her articles, 'Our Welcomed Guests' and 'The Melodrama in Latin America'.

[...].¹⁷ This market has not only exported Latin American soap operas but it has also, according to López, led to the production of *telenovelas* produced in the U.S. that deal with the experiences of Latinos such as 'a hodgepodge of exiles and immigrants in various stages of assimilation.'¹⁸ The discussion of the texts will reveal how the *telenovela* allows the immigrant viewer to maintain a sense of cultural and linguistic identity and be somehow connected with his/her country of origin. Similar to the debates surrounding the soap opera in Britain and in the U.S., critics defend the *telenovela* as an art form that incorporates feminist and resistant subtexts. One of the critics who claim that *telenovelas* are subversive is Linda Craft, who in her idealistic reading of this art form, argues that 'The *telenovela*, like the testimonial novel, forms part of a literature of resistance especially if one considers those texts that are, for the most part, written by and directed by women.'¹⁹ *Telenovelas* are complex popular cultural expressions since they can be interpreted from different perspectives. This is the argument of Thomas Tufte who in his book *Living with the Rubbish Queen* writes about the impact of *telenovelas* in Brazil. Speaking generally, he maintains that 'Commercial exploitation [and] ideological "guidance"' of *telenovelas* take place to some extent, but that they also 'reflect the cultural characteristics of, and concerns arising from the disruptions present in the complex societies of today.'²⁰ This multi-faceted dimension of *telenovelas* will be revealed in my literary analysis, as even those texts that articulate this form as manipulative also disclose a positive aspect.²¹

¹⁷ Elizabeth Fox, 'The Rise (and Fall) of the Telenovela abroad', *Intermedia*, 25.4 (August 1997), 37-39 (p. 38).

¹⁸ López, 'Our Welcomed Guests', p. 265. See also the *Variety* special issue on Latin American television which deals with the plans of Televisa and Univision to launch more Spanish-speaking channels in the U.S. *Variety*, April 1-7 2002.

¹⁹ Linda Craft, 'Testinovela/Telenovela: Latin American Popular Culture and Women's Narrative', *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures*, 8 (1990), 197-210 (p. 197).

²⁰ Thomas Tufte, *Living with the Rubbish Queen. Telenovelas, Culture and Modernity in Brazil* (Luton: University of Luton, 2000), p. 4.

²¹ The form of the *telenovela* is also parodied by the Latina artist Coco Fusto in her short film *Pochonovella*. This *telenovela* satirizes the experiences and problems faced by a Chicano/a family:

Woman Hollering Creek and telenovelas

Mexican popular culture, and in particular *telenovelas*, are an important part of the female protagonists' lives of Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. In the story 'Woman Hollering Creek', Cleófilas, in the name of romantic love, moves from Mexico to Texas to marry Juan Pedro and start a new, supposedly economically better life. As explained in the previous chapter, this new life unwittingly includes a wife-battering husband and a solitary existence which ultimately leads her back to Mexico with her six 'good-for-nothing brothers' (p. 43) and father. The text shows that Cleófilas' expectations regarding marriage and life have been defined by the narratives taking place in popular art forms such as *telenovelas*, romance novels or songs:

But what Cleófilas has been waiting for, has been whispering and sighing and giggling for, has been anticipating since she was old enough to lean against the window displays of gauze and butterflies and lace, is passion. [...] passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind of books and songs and *telenovelas* describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost.

Tú o Nadie. "You or No One." The title of the current favorite *telenovela*. The beautiful Lucía Méndez having to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because *that* is the most important thing, and did you see Lucía Méndez on the Bayer aspirin commercials – wasn't she lovely? Does she dye her hair do you think? Cleófilas is going to go to the *farmacia* [sic] and buy a hair rinse; her girlfriend Chela will apply it – it's not that difficult at all. (p. 44)

This passage not only expresses that the media presents reductive role models for Mexican working-class women like Cleófilas, but that it also attempts to turn them into consumers.²² Thus, when her husband hits her for the first time, 'she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*.' (p. 47) Despite having seen the *telenovelas*' female characters 'fight back' when faced with a similar situation, Cleófilas doesn't follow their example. The events related in this passage stand in stark contrast with

one of the sons is interested in Chicano nationalism, whilst the other has a white, blonde and dim girlfriend. See *Pochonovella*, Dir. Coco Fusto. Cabrona Soy Productions. 1996.

²² Lucía Méndez is a famous Mexican singer and actress of *telenovelas*, and according to López, 'a favorite of Televisa's novelas'. In 'Our Welcomed Guests', p. 267. She has worked in *telenovelas* such as *Tú o nadie* (1985), *Marielena* (1992) and *Amor de nadie* (1990). See <http://www.luciamendez.com>

Linda Craft's idea that 'soap opera engages in some consciousness-raising which some would regard as subversive and destructive of hearth and home should the woman decide she no longer wants to tolerate the chaos or abuse there.' (p. 204) Instead, this case exemplifies Modleski's argument regarding the contradictory nature of mass art: 'while appearing to be merely escapist, [it] simultaneously challenges and reaffirms traditional values, behaviours, and attitudes.'²³ Although Cleófilas may have seen the women retaliate against patriarchal oppression in the *telenovelas*, she has also been instructed 'to suffer for love [...]. The pain all sweet somehow.' (p. 45)

Despite being a fan of *telenovelas*, Cleófilas is deprived of this entertainment in the U.S. as she cannot afford a television set. When her husband is away, she watches some episodes at her neighbour Soledad's, who 'was often kind enough to retell what had happened on what episode of *María de Nadie* [...]' (p. 52) Without *telenovelas*, the protagonist turns towards the romance novels written by Corin Tellado. Tellado is a popular Spanish writer, renowned for writing romances with Cinderella-style plots resembling scripts of *telenovelas*. The conservative themes of Tellado's novels suggest, according to José Luis Méndez, that 'woman can only realize her true self through marriage.'²⁴ This critic also maintains that the luxurious settings are reminiscent of fairy stories and thus 'abstracted from history and from class struggle.' (p. 32) Furthermore, according to Méndez, 'the United States is presented as a land of promise in which the individual may get ahead with relative ease.' (p. 33) Considering this, we can assume that the Tellado romances have not only lured Cleófilas into the U.S. but also persuaded her to accept the role of submissive wife. Cisneros narrates the protagonist's affection for Tellado romances:

²³ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance. Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 112.

²⁴ José Luis Méndez, 'The Novels of Corin Tellado', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 5 (1986), 31-40 (p. 31).

He had thrown a book. Hers. From across the room. A hot welt across the cheek. She could forgive that. But what stung more was the fact it was her book, a love story by Corin Tellado, what she loved most now that she lived in the U.S., without a television set, without the *telenovelas*. (p. 52)

Cisneros ironically reflects that Cleófilas's husband attacks her with the same object that instructs her 'to suffer no matter what.' Her husband's violence and oppression is tolerated, at least in part, because of the unrealistic and romantic ideals sustained in mass cultural texts. However, the author refuses to blame *telenovelas* and romances alone for Cleófilas' oppression. As discussed in the previous chapter, folk tales that present passive role models for Mexican women are also important within the cultural environment in which Cleófilas was raised. Folk tales and *telenovelas* are part of a wider system of oppression that restricts her role in life.²⁵ Sonia Saldivar-Hull makes an interesting point when she observes that Cisneros does not simply provide a parody of *telenovelas* and romances. Despite escaping from her husband, Cleófilas future remains depressing. Saldivar-Hull expands:

Cisneros refuses to give us a facile, uncomplicated, happy ending. Cleófilas does not magically transform into a self-sacrificing but solid career woman from one page to the next. Her reality is that she is once again pregnant and has nowhere to turn except back to Mexico and [her family]. Cleófilas' decision to return to Mexico and her father's house does not offer us a utopian reading [...]. (p. 257)

In this text, *telenovelas* are posited as one of many narratives and icons that comply with the dominant ideology. Soap operas are also present in the life of the female protagonist of 'Bien Pretty' but this time Cisneros offers a more constructive message.²⁶ The protagonist Lupe begins to watch *telenovelas* to counteract her sadness when abandoned by her lover, who has to return to Mexico to his two wives and kids. Her life is reduced to work, rushing back home and stocking up on Mexican food so '[she] could be seated in front of the screen in time to watch *Rosa Salvaje* with Verónica Castro [...] Or Daniela Romo in *Balada por un Amor*. Or

²⁵ Sonia Saldivar-Hull makes a similar point in her article 'Woman Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms': 'This rendition illustrates how *telenovelas*, romances and traditional tales of infanticide by disobedient 'wailing women' who are punished for rejecting motherhood join to coerce Cleófilas into accepting patriarchal arrangements.' (p. 258)

²⁶ Cisneros, 'Bien Pretty', in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, pp. 137-65.

Adela Noriega in *Dulce Desafío*. I watched them all.' (p.161) But instead of embracing the *telenovela* female protagonists as role models who suffer in the name of love as Cleófilas did, Lupe realises that they are not 'real women':

I started dreaming of these Rosas and Briandas and Luceros. And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to. Not loves that are *tormentosos*. Not men powerful and passionate versus women either volatile and evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. The ones I've loved all my life. *If you don't like it lárgate, honey*. Those women. The ones I've known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. Las girlfriends. *Las comadres* [female friends]. Our mamas and *tías*. Passionate and powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce. (p. 161)

Although Lupe enjoys watching the dramatic plots of *telenovelas*, she is also capable of questioning the patriarchal message within them. In this way, Cisneros presents an alternative spectator to Cleófilas, and suggests that women are not always passive, easily manipulated viewers. John Fiske makes a similar point as he maintains that whilst the dominant popular forms can manipulate consumers, they can also be resisted:

[...] the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the people may construct, the social allegiances they may form. The people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically determined individuals.²⁷

Instead of perceiving the *telenovelas* characters as potential role models, Lupe sees them as anti-role models, as examples not to follow. Thus, Lupe's perception of the characters is utterly counter to that which the *telenovela*'s producers intended to communicate. Tufte argues a similar case as he says that ideological dominance is not always obtained since 'any type of culture product is always interpreted and reinterpreted on a personal level, in ways dependent on a series of socio-cultural, psychological, economical, political and historical factors.' (p. 19) In Cisneros's text, rejecting the reductive message of *telenovelas* also involves disallowing the message arising from Mexican popular music. Lupe also refuses to listen to 'Lola Beltrán sobbing "*Soy infeliz*" into her four cervezas' in favour of a more empowering song by Daniela Romo : ' "*Ya no. Es verdad que te adoro, pero más me adoro yo.*" I love

²⁷ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London and New York: 1995), p. 45-46.

you, honey, but I love me more.'²⁸ (p. 163) Her empowering subjectivity is replicated in the theme of the songs she chooses to listen to.

In her short stories, Cisneros presents two types of mass culture female consumer: one is easily distracted by *telenovelas* and romances and is apathetic towards the class and patriarchal oppression she experiences whilst the other is able to enjoy popular art forms but is also capable of responding to its patriarchal ideology. In this way, the Chicana author rejects a one-dimensional view in favour of a more comprehensive understanding of these simplistic but entertaining popular culture texts.

Latinos/as' popular culture expressions

John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* discusses different popular culture narratives employed by the Latinos/as.²⁹ The Chicano writer portrays these art forms negatively, refusing to ascribe them a capacity for resistance. Certain popular cultural art forms are particularly supportive of the dominant ideology, pressurizing women into accepting a passive role. For this reason, in the analysis of this novel the religious theme is revisited, as Catholicism joins forces with popular culture into forcing women to endure social injustices. The over-dramatic plots of *telenovela* are also posited as supportive of the Catholic doctrine, encouraging women to suffer with the hope of being granted a miracle. Through the character of Amalia Gómez, Rechy provides an examination of the social problems experienced by the Latino/a community in the city of Los Angeles. Themes such as the abuse suffered by illegal immigrants, the gang problem in Latino/a barrios and homophobia are addressed along with the feminist focus of the book.

²⁸ Lola Beltrán (1932-1996) was a popular Mexican singer of rancheras. In her famous song 'Soy infeliz', the female protagonist drowns her sorrows and broken heart in alcohol.

²⁹ I will refer to this novel as *The Miraculous Day* from now on.

John Rechy is a Chicano writer best known for his novels of homosexual content such as *City of Night* (1963), the novel with which he became recognized. Due to a lack of ethnic focus in his work, critics have debated whether he should be considered a Chicano writer or not. *The Miraculous Day* signals a thematic shift in his work as racial and gender issues become central in the novel, although in Rechy's view this change is not so significant. The patriarchal oppression suffered by the female protagonist is one of the main focus points of the novel, a theme, Rechy argues, connected with the disdain of gays: "I strongly believe that the general despisement [sic] of homosexuals has at its roots the hatred of women by the heterosexual structure."³⁰ Homosexuality is also dealt with in the novel as Rechy explores how difficult it is for a Mexican-American woman to come to terms with the gay sexual orientation of her son.

Described by the author as a novel that 'extends into surrealism, and then into fable,'³¹ the text follows the life of a Mexican-American woman, Amalia Gómez, for a day in Los Angeles. Through flashbacks, the reader learns of the tragic life led by Amalia. The novel begins by showing Amalia's bewilderment when she sees a 'large silver cross in the otherwise clear sky'³² one May morning and she wonders whether it is a miraculous sign. The text follows Amalia's pilgrimage through Los Angeles and the distressing news she receives that day. She not only discovers that her son is a male hustler, that her daughter has become an aggressive woman but also that Amalia's new partner has made sexual advancements towards her daughter. The upset of this day awakens Amalia's memories of the death of her son Manny, as well as other distressing episodes from her life. We discover that her father, with the acknowledgment of her mother, sexually abused Amalia. At fifteen, she was forced to marry the neighbour who had raped her, leaving her pregnant. Amalia is portrayed

³⁰ Charles Isherwood, 'Beyond the night', *Advocate*, 15 October 1996, p. 60.

³¹ Castillo, 'Interview with John Rechy', p. 119.

³² John Rechy, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (New York: Arcade, 1993), p. 3.

as a woman who has prioritised her family in her life, and who has tried to find a man who would make a good husband and father. Unfortunately, she always ends up with partners who ill-treat her.

Disheartened and angered by the sequence of tragic events that comprise her life, Amalia visits different individuals and places looking for support and solace. Frustrated and angered by the miserable life she has had, Amalia demands a miracle from the Virgin Mary. At the end of the novel, her wish is granted as she believes she witnesses a miracle. Thus, the novel ends by revealing a confident Amalia who after finally obtaining the redemption she had sought so desperately, finds the strength to face new challenges and problems.

In this text, the mass media is also portrayed as an important part of Latinas lives. The mass cultural art form of the *telenovela* is again posited as a vehicle that enables women to escape from the hardships of reality. Rechy presents a very critical approach towards the *telenovela* as he portrays it as degrading and manipulative. His critique is manifested through the detailed description of the plot of Amalia's 'cherished Saturday serial' (p. 100), *Camino al sueño*, (road to a dream). The *telenovela* protagonists, Antonio Montenegro and his wife Lucinda, belong to the 'prominent' Soto-Mayor and Montenegro dynasties and 'have a perfect home, all chrome and glass and staircases.' (p. 101) The protagonist learns from the 'oldest retainer' that his wife has been previously married to an evil man and that she must go back to him so he will not destroy the dynasty of the Montenegros. Rechy is obviously parodying the exaggerated and over-dramatic story lines found in *telenovelas*. *Camino al sueño* presents all the typical features of this art form. Romantic love is presented as the ultimate fulfilment in a woman's life. The character Antonio says about his wife: ' "She had no past except that which belongs to us both. Our lives began when we found each other."' (p. 102). The characters

have a 'most noble heritage' and are devoted Catholics: '[Antonio] was once honoured with a private audience with the Holy Pope.' (p. 101) The protagonists' servants are described as 'adoring' and Tita, the Indian servant who confesses Lucinda's shameful past to Antonio, is portrayed as submissive and honoured to be working for such a noble family: '“I have been privileged to serve the Montenegros from before your birth, [...] I would have given my life for them, and then for you – and now for our Lucinda.”' (p. 102) This representation of the Indian servant is indicative of the class and racial dynamics that this genre portrays.

Amalia compares the lifestyle and events presented in the *telenovela* with those in her own life, as if the serial was the pattern to follow:

Antonio and his wife, Lucinda, of the prominent Soto-Mayor dynasty, have a perfect home, all chrome and glass and staircases.
Amalia touched the armrests of the sofa bed. The covers she had sewn slipped off every night. She felt the matted cotton underneath. (p. 101)

““ Lucinda and I were married at the altar,” Antonio reminds her. “God heard our vows. My beloved Lucinda wore the purest white.”
And I did not, Amalia thought. (p. 103)

When comparing her material possessions and the events of her life to those of the unrealistic televised characters, Amalia is left with a feeling of not being ethically or financially good enough. This passage exemplifies what Henriette Riegel states in her article 'Soap operas and gossip': 'Through soap operas, viewers see other families on television to which to compare their own.'³³ Rechy exposes that *telenovelas* portray romantic love as the most fulfilling aspect of one's life as well as the idea that to suffer in the name of love is appropriate.

Amalia is not the only Latina woman fascinated with *telenovelas*. In the sweatshop where she works, women regularly engage in a discussion of their favourite *telenovelas*. During their lunch break the female workers participate in a

³³ Henriette Riegel, 'Soap operas and gossip', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 29.4 (1996), 201-09 (p. 205).

conversation in which they exchange views on the latest developments of their favourite *telenovelas* as if they were real events:

"Well, the wife [...] has just confronted Concha, his mistress, [...]" "Blanca told Concha she knows she's having an affair with Aurelio, although it's clearly not Aurelio's fault, he's a good man seduced. Yes, says the brazen Concha, and right under your nose. You mean while I was pregnant with my little Anuncio? Blanca demands, although she's so overwhelmed by the terrible affront that she has to sit down with her rosary in order to keep from fainting. Precisely, that vile Concha says."

"She's an evil woman, that Concha," another woman offered. (pp.49-50)

Despite portraying *telenovelas*' narratives quite negatively, the novel reveals that they also enable women to socialize and engage in discussions initiated by the themes touched on by the serial. This passage epitomizes Tufte's argument as he argues that '[telenovelas] are of course a source of entertainment, but the recognition and relevance that the audience accords to the narratives reveal the meaningful social, cultural and even political functions that can be attributed to *telenovelas*.' (p. 228) In the text, it is also clear that these Latina women watch a Spanish-speaking programme, thus allowing them to assert the linguistic aspect of their cultural identity.

The idea that *telenovelas* function as an escape mechanism that permits Latinas to avoid facing reality is again manifested in a passage where the Immigration and Naturalization Service arrive in the sweatshop looking for illegal immigrants. The officers ill-treat the workers, especially one of the male workers, Jorge, whom they attack. During the break, the women return to their *telenovela* discussions, ignoring the recent disturbing events. However, one of the female workers, Rosario, offended by their indifference, shouts at them:

"*Estúpidas!* Don't you care about what happened to Jorge just now? Don't you care about the women who work next to you? – arrested and sent back without even their wages! For God's sake, don't you see your own sons shoved around by cops only because they're Mexicans?" (p. 54)

Despite this outburst, the women remain silent for some minutes until Milagros, another worker, replies: "What are you babbling about, *mujer*? Do you know?" (p. 54), only to return to her chat about the serial. Later on in the novel, we

learn of the real problems that Milagros faces outside the fantasy world of the *telenovela*. Milagros confesses to Amalia that she is an illegal immigrant and that her sons have drug and alcohol abuse related problems. Amalia is astounded when she realises that 'this was the same woman who at the sewing sweatshops kept everyone entertained with her gossip.' (p. 19)

The Miraculous Day describes the *telenovela* as a highly popular televised programme among the Latino/a population, raising questions about the reasons for its popularity. Studies regarding the depiction of Latinos/as in the media claim that this minority group is underrepresented. According to the National Council of La Raza, 'Hispanics are virtually absent as characters in the entertainment media and as correspondents and anchors in news media.'³⁴ Furthermore,

[...] Hispanics in television entertainment are both more likely to be portrayed negatively and less likely to be portrayed positively than any other group. In addition, TV portrayals tend to reinforce derogatory stereotypes of Latinos as people who are poor, of low status, lazy, deceptive, and criminals.³⁵

Telenovelas, on the contrary, have Latino/a characters and do not present a negative image of the Latino/a population. This melodramatic form counteracts the lack of and the negative stereotypes of Latinos/as in U.S. television, allowing the Latino/a viewer to identify with the characters. The data provided by these media studies sheds a new light on the popularity of the *telenovela* and other Spanish-speaking television programmes in the U.S.

Another television programme criticised by Rechy for its lack of socio-economical awareness is 'Queen for a Day.' This program rewards women who have

³⁴ National Council of La Raza, 'Out of the Picture: Hispanics in the Media', in *Latin Looks. Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, ed. by Clara E. Rodríguez (Oxford, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 21-35 (p. 21).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 29. See also S. Robert Lichter and Daniel R. Amundson 'Distorted Reality: Hispanic Characters in TV Entertainment', in *Latin Looks*, ed. by Rodríguez, pp. 57-72. These critics also argue that Latinos are underrepresented and negatively portrayed although their recent analysis is more hopeful. After studying the 1994-95 television season, they 'found some welcome progress in television's portrayal of Hispanics [...]'. Even though, 'The proportion of Hispanics characters was up but still far below the proportion of Hispanics Americans in the real world. Latinos were "ghettoized" in a handful of series [...], and few portrayed prosperous, well-educated, authoritative characters.' (p. 71)

suffered and endured hardship in their lives. The woman who is applauded the most is crowned 'Queen for a day'. Amalia remembers a friend of her mother, Concepción, who had wanted to appear on the program;

Concepción announced, "I asked Miss Rise, the social worker, how to get on that program. [...] You have to have a horrible life, [...] I would tell them that my youngest son was stabbed in a gang fight and that the doctors at the clinic say I'll lose my sight entirely before long." She sighted. "I *deserve* to win." (p. 32)

In this programme, the victim is celebrated for her suffering, granting her attention that had been denied to her previously. This passage illustrates perfectly Roman Gubern's argument that television is believed to be the medium where only what is considered significant is allowed to appear:

[...] y esta selectividad hace que la presencia en pantalla constituya lo que los economistas califican como un *bien escaso* y por lo tanto muypreciado. Por eso a la gente le gusta aparecer dentro de esta ventana, como signo de reconocimiento y prestigio. [...] Aspiran a ser estrellas, aunque sea sólo durante aquellos quince minutos de los que habló Andy Warhol. Es una muestra del narcisismo contemporáneo que trata de conjurar las frustraciones y la impersonalidad de tantas vidas grises, prosaicas y anónimas en nuestra sociedad masificada y burocratizada.³⁶

By appearing on television, women like Concepción become visible in a society that otherwise ignores them. Although it could be argued that this act of visibility is beneficial in terms of consciousness raising, the programme does not engage in a debate on the causes of the suffering, such as, in the case of Concepción, health issues and/or gang problems. Rechy reflects how programmes like these and the *telenovela* avoid dealing with the social, racial and economic issues that are directly affecting the audience.

Other aspects of popular culture fascinate and influence the protagonist. Amalia takes pride in the fact that she resembles the famous Mexican actress Maria Felix.

³⁶ Roman Gubern, 'Fabulación audiovisual y mitogenia', in *Telenovela. Ficción popular y mutaciones populares*, ed. by Eliseo Verón and Lucrecia Escudero Chauvel (Barcelona: Gedisa editorial, 1997), pp 29-36 (pp. 30-1).

'[...] and this selectivity is responsible for the fact that the screen constitutes what the economists call a *scarce good* and thus, it is much appreciated. That's why people enjoy appearing on this screen, because it is a sign of acknowledgement and prestige [...].

They aspire to be stars, even for only those fifteen minutes that Andy Warhol spoke about. It is a sign of the contemporary narcissism that tries to join the frustrations and impersonality of so many grey, prosaic and anonymous lives in our multitudinous and bureaucratised society.'

Amalia admires the empowering women that this actress interpreted, as well as her beauty:

Whether the beautiful "la Maria" played an aristocrat or a peasant, she was always, finally, in control of any situation – a revolution, a divorce – and if, she wanted, she could destroy any man with a single arch of a perfect eyebrow; when she was older, Amalia would think she resembled the great movie star, without the aloofness. Once Teresa actually told her, "You resemble la Maria, sometimes." Amalia rehearsed, but she was never able to achieve the disdainful look of the movie star; and she didn't really want it. (pp. 15-16)

Maria Felix (1914-2002) was a Mexican actress that became famous during the Golden Epoch of Mexican cinema with films such as *Doña Barbara* (1943) and *Enamorada* (1946). But her celebrity status was also enlarged by her marriages to celebrities such as Agustín Lara and Jorge Negrete and her friendship with renowned artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. According to Carlos Monsiváis, Felix, also known as La Doña, became a myth, embodying a 'belleza cruel' (cruel beauty), and propagated the idea that 'la mujer no renuncia a su personalidad'.³⁷ (woman does not discard her personality) Amalia remembers this actress on different occasions and rejoices in the fact that her daughter resembles her. But, Amalia also recalls that she was told that 'Maria Felix's son, a handsome young man who had come to Los Angeles to try to get into American movies, had been arrested, for drugs [...]' (p. 127) This information is only briefly mentioned, suggesting that Amalia does not want to acknowledge the drug-related problems connected with the glamorous actress. Amalia doesn't want to accept that her role model and admired icon faces similar problems to her own and those of her co-workers.

Catholicism and folk religion

Amalia doesn't understand why, despite all the suffering she has endured throughout her life, she does not receive a sign from God. Amalia's reasoning is understandable if we consider the strong Catholic upbringing she had been subjected to. Through flash-backs, the reader is informed that Amalia's mother used to cherish a statue of

³⁷ Carlos Monsiváis, 'La voluntad de permanencia', *El País*, 10 April 2002, available at <http://www.elpais.es>

La Dolorosa, the Mother of Sorrows, 'draped in black, wrenched in grief, hands clasped in anguish, tiny pieces of glass embedded under agonized eyes to testify to endless tears [...].'⁵ (p. 9) Catholic priests are also presented as figures that perpetuate the notion that one must endure pain in life. Years ago, Amalia asked Father Ysidro why the protagonist of the film *A Song of Bernadette* had to suffer so much, and she was told:

"Our Lady requires sacrifices to find us worthy, Amalia. Especially of those she honors with her divine revelations."
 "But Bernadette's life wasn't all that happy to begin with. Her family was poor and she –"
 "You have to earn God's miracles, m'ija." [...]
 "But why in so many riddles?"
 "God's language." (p. 30)

The conservative messages promulgated by the television programmes she watches are sustained by the Catholic doctrine. The far-fetched and over-dramatic plots of the *telenovela* also encourage her to believe not only that to suffer is natural but also that miracles can occur. The *telenovela Camino al sueño* ends this way:

The old woman speaks to her clenched crucifix:
 "O Dios, O Madre Sagrada! Is there no way out of this nightmare, O God, O sacred Mother?"
 She shakes her weary head. "None." She begins to look up. "None except –" She gazes at heaven: "Only a miracle can save us now! Give me a sign that you understand!" (p. 104)

Rechy suggests that *telenovela*'s dramatic narrative also encourages Amalia to believe that her suffering will be rewarded with a miracle, thus supporting the Catholic doctrine. The words said at the end of the serial make Amalia wonder 'What if God sent a sign – by way of the Blessed Mother – and you did not believe it! Worse yet, ignored it?' (p. 105) She then leaves the house and visits the nearby Catholic Church in order to light a candle for her dead son and find comfort in an image of the Virgin Mary. Praying in front of a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Amalia observes:

[The Virgin] was brown, but that was all about her that looked Mexican, Amalia always noticed; the features were like those of all the other saints and angels throughout the church. Manny had once asked her if all the saints, angels, Jesus, and God were *gabachos*. Amalia, too, wondered why they all looked like Anglos. (p. 150)

Amalia wonders whether the Virgin of Guadalupe is a fabrication and questions her authenticity as a Mexican woman. The Virgin is not the only figure whose integrity is questioned. Disturbed by the fact that she had been unfaithful to her partner the previous night, Amalia decides to confess. In the confessional booth, the priest demands a detailed narration of the sexual encounter. Deeply embarrassed, she gives an account of her experience, only to find out that the priest has masturbated during her confession. Feeling 'lost, adrift, desolate' (p. 158) after this event, the protagonist turns to an alternative religious practice, *curanderismo* with the hope of finding the solace that the Catholic priest has failed to provide. Claiming to 'solve all your problems' and 'WE ARE OF YOUR FAITH' (p. 162), Amalia enters the house of 'consultas.' There, she is met by an old couple, Doña Esmeralda and Don Rogelio who 'wore a huge crucifix.' (p. 164) But the decoration of the house disconcerts her since she does not associate it with a good Catholic practice. Unsettled by the presence of chicken claws and feathers, she states: 'I am a Catholic, a *good* Catholic.' (p. 165) Her reaction reflects how Amalia's strict definition of Catholic practices clashes with those of alternative folk religions. After a *limpia* has been performed on her, Amalia tells the *curanderos* her worries about her family as well as the previous night's disturbing experience with a man. Their vague and ambiguous words make Amalia realise that they are not going to provide the answers she needs either. However, she does not want to leave the *consulta* without being told what she needs to hear:

"I won't pay you if you don't tell me what you promise on your sign."

"There will be only happiness!" the old woman snapped. [...]

"I want you to tell me that everything in my life will be in order when I return home."

"The smoke from the incense indicated that," the old woman hissed [...]

"I want you to tell me that miracles exist." [...]

"Who can doubt miracles!" Doña Esmeralda shouted at Amalia.

"No one!" Padre Rogelio's voice was even louder.

"You're liars". Amalia said. "I don't believe anything you've told me. I just needed to hear those words." (p. 170)

Amalia is deceived by the figures from both Catholicism and folk religion, manifesting that alternative religious practices are not necessarily more supportive than official ones. Despite becoming aware of the pretence of the *curanderos*, Amalia leaves the shop feeling 'exhilarated' (p. 170) and triumphant, although this feeling soon fades when she witnesses the shooting of a boy by a gang. When she gets home, she notices that the rosebud in her garden has produced a blossom, an event which she interprets as 'the second sign'³⁸. (p. 174) But, once again, her new hope is shattered by some distressing news. She discovers her son is a male prostitute and her daughter Gloria tells her that Amalia's partner, Reynaldo, has been making sexual advances towards her. When Reynaldo returns, he doesn't deny the accusations. Amalia finds it hard to come to terms with her son's sexuality and tells him 'It's a sin! Our Church and God forbid it!' (p. 183) In the middle of the argument with her children, her friend Rosario phones her. Rosario has gone into hiding after her involvement in the murder of an immigration and naturalisation officer. Rosario, who has always been a guiding figure in her life, encourages her to reject the false hopes and lies transmitted by religion:

"Don't you believe, Rosario?" Amalia had to ask. She had to hear her answer, yes, and then God -

"No"

"But without the intervention of the Holy Mother -"

"- you're left to find your own strength, *corazón*," Rosario said softly, "you don't accept that you *must* be a victim."

"There are miracles -" What Rosario had just said had disoriented Amalia powerfully.

"Those happen only in *fábulas*," Rosario said. "And we have too many fables." (p. 177)

Confused and dismayed, she leaves home and believing that 'Only a miracle can save us now' (p. 190), she ends up in a nearby church. There she begins to question the *fables* surrounding the figure of the Virgin Mary. Standing in front of a statue of the Virgin, she asks her: '[...] didn't you feel pain because you conceived purely? - a Virgin mother, your womb always untainted, unhurting [...] *Then how*

³⁸ Luis León argues that this event has an especial significance for Amalia as roses are linked with the legend of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In 'The Poetic Uses of Religion in The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez', *Religion and American Culture*, 9.2 (1999), 205-31.

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can you be blessed among women?' (p. 196) Unable to understand why she is not granted a miracle, Amalia no longer passively prays but demands concession and recognition of her suffering from the Virgin:

Don't turn away! You saw it all! – the ugliness, the humiliations, you saw my father, and you saw Salvador discard me against the trash, you heard Teresa accuse and hate me and you just listened, and I raised my children the only way I knew [...].

Face me !

The Madonna faced down.

You gave me no choice! [...]

I have not lost my faith! It has grown stronger, strong enough for me to speak to you like this....

That is why I am finally able to plead with you – pray for – supplicate– ask for– I am hoping for–I beg–I ask– I need – [...]

I demand a miracle! (pp. 198-99)

Influenced by Rosario's words, she decides to become an active agent within the Catholic domain. Instead of accepting the idea that suffering is part of a Chicana's life, she demands a miracle in return for her ordeal. Redemption is granted to Amalia when she ends up in a Beverly Hills shopping centre, where an armed man takes her as hostage. Infuriated, she shouts 'No more!'³⁹ And pushes the man away from her. The captor is then shot and lies on the floor. Amalia believes he asks her to bless him and she does so. Immediately after this, Amalia has a vision of the Virgin, 'a dazzling white radiance in a gleam of blue and within it on a gathering of red roses stood [...] *The Blessed Mother, with her arms outstretched to her.*' (p. 206) However, Amalia is unaware that her vision is actually a *tele-vision*, since it is the lights of the cameras that have been filming this event that caused the glare. But Amalia is convinced that a miracle has been granted to her through the apparition of the Virgin. Thus, at the end of the book Amalia feels 'resurrected with new life' (p. 206), ready to face the problems in her life. Once again, Rechy suggests that certain mass cultural art forms lead women to believe that suffering will somehow be rewarded. Although the protagonist is empowered through the witnessing of a *miracle*, this event does not necessarily ensure her emancipation from the different

³⁹ In the interview with Debra Castillo, Rechy argues that 'No more!' represents the 'cry of Mexican liberation.' (p. 20)

systems that oppress her. Luis León argues that the ending signifies that Amalia has finally become aware of the different levels of oppression she suffers:

Her escape mechanisms in the text are dreams, fantasies, and desires produced by the media, especially her *tele novela*, and the church. Her redemption comes only in her awakening from dreamtime – especially from the realm of the culturally symbolic that constrains women's expectations and authority. (p. 226)

I disagree with this view as I do not believe that the ending is as straightforward as suggested by León. Since Amalia's vision is a creation of the media, the novel questions to what extent this redemption will impart a totally new perspective on life. Also, Amalia believes that her distressing life has been rewarded, a message provided by mass culture and the Church. Although Amalia wants to put an end to her oppression, the book leaves several questions unanswered, for instance, if and how will she come to terms with her son's sexuality and whether she will break away from the Catholic Church. It is hard to imagine that a deeply religious, working-class Latina will become aware of the different levels of oppression exercised by the Church and the media overnight. I believe that Rechy suggests that what León calls, the 'awakening from dreamtime' requires practice and is a long process.

Alternative cultural expressions

In Rechy's work, the alternative cultural expressions employed by Latinos/as do not succeed in counteracting the dominant ideology. For example, folk religion representatives are not posited as successful alternative figures to the official ones, as they are characterized as greedy and uncaring individuals. Another popular culture expression presented in the text is muralism, which allows Latinos/as to address the socio-economic problems faced by the community. However, the nationalist ideology expressed in the murals is criticised for its exclusion of women. Amalia enjoys looking at the murals that exist in her area, 'paintings as colourful as those on

calendars, sprawled on whole walls.' (p. 45) But there is a particular mural that captivates her:

[...] there was a wall painting that fascinated and puzzled her, and she went there often to look at it: A muscular Aztec prince, amber-gold-faced, in lordly feathers, stood with others as proud as he. They gazed towards the distance. Behind them on a hill pale armed men mounted on horses watched them. At the opposite end of the painting brown-faced, muslin-clothed men stared into a bright horizon. They were the ones whom the Aztecs were facing distantly. (p. 45)

An old man who notices her bewilderment explains to her that the mural represents the Conquest where the conquistadors fight "[...] the *revolucionarios*, who will triumph and bring about *Aztlán*, our promised land of justice.'" (p. 45) But, Amalia notices that 'There were no women. Where were they? Had *they* survived?' (p. 45) This remark challenges the argument of art critic Shifra M. Goldman who discusses the political and social agenda of Californian muralism: 'As a major carrier of public communication to Mexican communities in the United States, it has been a vehicle of protest and demands addressed to the power structures for equitable solutions to problems facing those communities.'⁴⁰ By pointing out the absence of women in the mural that glorifies Mexican history and the notion of *Aztlán*, Rechy exposes how the nationalistic project of Chicanos/as is shaped from a masculinist perspective. Hence, the author challenges the notion that muralism and its nationalist utopian ideology addresses all Chicanos/as, that is both genders. This idea is again manifested when Amalia notices a wall 'scrawled in red, bleeding paint' that says: 'AZTLAN ES UNA FABULA' (p.70). Here, Rechy expresses that the nationalist movement is another fable that has promised Chicanas like Amalia a better future that is never delivered.⁴¹

In *The Miraculous Day*, popular cultural art forms do not instigate rebellion against the hegemonic practices and beliefs. Nor do popular cultural expressions or

⁴⁰ Shifra M. Goldman, 'How, Why, Where, and When It All Happened: Chicano Murals of California', in *Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals*, ed. by Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sánchez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 23-53 (p. 23).

⁴¹ José David Saldívar argues a similar point in *Border Matters* when discussing Rechy's critique of *Aztlán*. 'If "*Aztlán es una fábula*," it is partly so because its Chicano youth philosophy glorifying Aztec warriors while at the same time excluding women is itself a deception.' (p. 117)

her church incite Amalia to question her oppression from a class, racial or gender point of view. The cultural art forms that invite her to counter the racialized oppression Chicanos/as live under leave women out of their demands. In this novel popular culture enables Chicanos/as to assert their cultural and linguistic identity, but, it does not manage to instigate opposition to the dominant. Even though the end of the novel suggests that Amalia is beginning to question the *fales* she has believed in all her life, her 'awakening' owes more to her friend Rosario rather than to the messages provided by popular culture forms.

Esperanza's Box of Saints: crossing the border with San Judas Tadeo

Maria Amparo Escandón's novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* presents a different perspective on popular culture, suggesting that it *can* incite resistance. Although Escandón also deals with Los Angeles and its Mexican population, she does not adopt the pessimistic and negative approach that Rechy employs in his work. Whilst in *The Miraculous Day*, Latinos/as are economically and racially oppressed, this fact is not manifested so explicitly in *Esperanza's Box of Saints*.⁴² This is partly due to the humorous approach employed in the book, which ensures that issues such as immigration and prostitution are not dealt with in a pessimistic manner.

Although the entertainment aspect of art forms like the *telenovelas* is underlined, emphasis is placed on the processes of transformation that Mexican popular culture can undergo in the hands of Mexican immigrants. As mentioned in the thesis introduction, I have decided to discuss the work of this Mexican writer as it clearly expresses how in the U.S., Mexican popular culture can become a form of resistance against the dominant ideology. Although Escandón is Mexican, she has

⁴² Maria Amparo Escandón, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999). This is the first novel by this Mexican writer.

lived in California for fifteen years.⁴³ Even though she may not describe herself as a 'Chicana', her transcultural experience and residence in the U.S. liken her to writers such as Sandra Cisneros or Ana Castillo.

Set in Mexico, the novel narrates the journey undertaken by the young widow Esperanza (hope) Díaz as she searches for her daughter. Esperanza takes her twelve-year-old daughter Blanca for a routine tonsillectomy but the child dies unexpectedly. The hospital informs the mother that because an unknown virus caused Blanca's death, she won't be able to see the corpse. Upon returning home, Esperanza sees the apparition of Saint Judas Tadeo, the patron of desperate causes, on the window of her oven, who tells her that her child is not dead. Convinced that Blanca has been abducted and sold into prostitution, Esperanza is determined to find her daughter. She leaves her town, Tlacotalpan, with the intention of working in brothels and finding out information that will lead her to her daughter. First, she works as a maid in a brothel but her investigation takes her to Tijuana where she works as a prostitute in the 'Pink Palace', a luxurious brothel where she becomes the 'favourite' of a San Diego judge. From there, she crosses the border illegally and arrives in Los Angeles where she works during the day in a travel agency, and during the night in a brothel. In this brothel, her work consists of staying in a cubicle doing ordinary things while clients observe her through a telescope. At a Mexican wrestling fight, she meets the wrestler El Angel Justiciero (the righteous angel) with whom she has a love affair. Not finding any trace of her daughter, she visits a church that has a statue of Saint Judas Tadeo with the hope of obtaining some kind of information. Whilst asking the saint what she should do next, she believes the saint instructs her to return home since he will re-appear in the oven. Back in Mexico, Esperanza realises that her friend has cleaned the oven and that the saint will not appear. Whilst having a bath,

⁴³ See her interview in the film *Santitos* website, <http://www.santitos.com/espanol/interviews/interviews.html>

however Blanca's image appears on the bathroom stained wall. It is then that she understands that what the saint originally meant is that Blanca is not alive or dead, but is 'in that little space in between' (p. 245). This apparition denotes the end of her search and that Blanca has become Esperanza's 'own little saint, [her] little *santita*.' (p. 245) The story ends with the inevitable visit of El Angel justiciero who has come to Mexico in search of Esperanza. Packed with the entire bathroom wall and Esperanza's box of saints, they both leave for Los Angeles to start a new life together.

Esperanza's search for her daughter turns into a journey of self-discovery in which she must learn to come to terms with her loss. Despite dealing with tragic and disheartening themes such as the loss of a child and illegal immigration, the humorous approach and the protagonist's naïve attitude create an entertaining novel. Escandón wrote the book simultaneously in English and Spanish (*Santitos*), thus obliterating the concept of original version and translation when dealing with the languages English and Spanish. In an interview, the author explains that after living for many years in California, her mental state changed from 'tourist' to 'immigrant'.⁴⁴ It was with this newfound identity that she decided to write her novel in both languages. But, as she explains, using a different language (English) also entails taking into account a different readership than the one she is used to. She says:

[...] decidí no traducirla, sino reescribirla tomando en cuenta las diferencias culturales. [...] Un ejemplo típico de esto: en la versión en inglés, escribo que el marido de Soledad se parecía al difunto ídolo cinematográfico mexicano Pedro Infante. En la versión en español, escribo: se parecía a Pedro Infante. Todos sabemos que es difunto, que es ídolo cinematográfico, y que es mexicano.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 'I decided not to translate it, but to re-write it taking into account the cultural differences. [...] For example: in the English version, I write that Soledad's husband looks like the late Mexican film star Pedro Infante. In the Spanish version I write: he looked like Pedro Infante. We all know he is dead, a cinematographic idol, and that he is Mexican.'

Interview in <http://www.santitos.com/espanol/interviews/interviews.html>

In 1998, the novel was turned into a film, *Santitos*, directed by Alejandro Springall, obtaining a great success in Mexico, where it was made, and abroad.⁴⁶

Re-writing the narrative of the 'good prostitute'

In *Esperanza's*, Escandón takes up a recurrent figure of Mexican literature and cinema: the good prostitute. In her book *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman, 1940-1950*, Joanne Hershfield argues that during the 1930s and 1940s many films dealt with a good woman, who either because of economic necessity or other reasons, is forced into prostitution. According to Hershfield, 'the cabaretera attempted to update the La Malinche paradigm of the "bad woman" in order to assimilate the Mexican working-class woman whose newfound social and economic power challenged the male's traditional position of superiority.'⁴⁷ In films such as *Salón Mexico* or *La Mujer del Puerto*,⁴⁸ 'women may be forced into prostitution due to economic misfortunes, but they remain essentially "good women."' (p. 108) This is what occurs to Esperanza, as she becomes a prostitute precisely because she is a 'good mother'. But, in the novel, 'the ambiguous position of good woman and whore'⁴⁹ is taken to a new level by the presence of Esperanza's religious devotion and her collection of saintly statues. The innocence and goodwill of Esperanza is emphasized by her religious fervour which leads her not only to blindly follow the dictates of Saint Judas Tadeo, but also to set up an altar with her saints whenever she stays. This characteristic exemplifies Carlos Monsiváis's observations, as he remarks that Mexican prostitutes are renowned for their 'feroz catolicismo [...], sus devociones guadalupanas, sus cuartos poblados de estampitas y veladoras.'⁵⁰ Her dual position as

⁴⁶ Oskar L. Belategui, 'Milagro mexicano', *El Correo Español*, 21 January 2000, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman 1940-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), p. 79.

⁴⁸ *La mujer del Puerto*. Dir. Arcady Boytler (1934); *Salón Mexico*. Dir. Emilio Fernández. (1949)

⁴⁹ Hershfield, p. 105.

⁵⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, 'La mujer en la cultura mexicana', in *Mujer y sociedad en American Latina*, ed. by Lucia Guerra-Cuningham (UC Irvine, 1980), pp. 101-17 (p. 111).

virgin and whore is stressed by her surprising lack of sexual encounters.⁵¹ In the Tijuana brothel, she works exclusively for one client, who is fascinated by her maternal rather than sexual aspect. In the Los Angeles brothel, she works in a peepshow cubicle where she sets up her altar, bringing attention once again to her position as virgin/whore. Male customers watch her through a telescope as she does ordinary things. At one point, Esperanza even compares herself to the powerful icon of motherhood the Virgin of Guadalupe. In Los Angeles, she comes across a mural of this religious figure and tells her: "So you ended up all the way up here, too? [...] It's amazing what one will do for one's children, right?" (p. 188)

In the Mexican *cabaretera* films, the 'good prostitute' usually dies at the end of the film, a sign of her martyrdom. When discussing the film *Santa*,⁵² Hershfield explains that 'Santa has to die, because she cannot be both virgin and whore.' (p. 13) But Escandón re-writes the end of her *cabaretera* story by allowing Esperanza 'to live happily ever after' with her partner. This time, a Mexican ex-prostitute is forgiven for her *sins* and allowed to re-form a family, addressing the contemporary times in which women do not have to pay so dearly for transgressing the norms. *Esperanza's* re-appropriates a Mexican classic theme and restores the figure of the good prostitute as a woman who is rewarded for her sacrifices. By allowing Esperanza to rebuild her life in California with El Angel, the author spares her the option of returning to her native Mexican town as a childless widow.

Esperanza is not only the object of a male gaze in the Los Angeles peep show, but also back in Mexico. In Tlacotalpan, Father Salvador, in love with her, observes

'fierce Catholicism, their Guadalupean devotions, their bedrooms full of engravings and votive candles'

⁵¹ Debra Castillo, who discusses the figure of the loose woman in her book *Easy Women*, argues that Mexican texts that deal with prostitutes avoid any mention of sex: 'Representations of the prostitute specifically elide her sexuality, making it abstractly present by displacement onto her body, but all the more hyperdetermined and false because of this displacement [...]' (p. 39) *Easy Women. Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

⁵² According to Hershfield, one of the earliest films that deals with this theme is *Santa*, directed by Antonio Moreno in 1931. The film is based on a novel by Federico Gamboa.

all her movements and intensely follows all the activities she undertakes in her journey. In a conversation with God, he confesses how he observes and fantasizes about her whenever she visits his church:

She kneels in one of the front pews and, as she speaks to You more casually than I have ever witnessed before [...] She takes off her one sandal and puts red nail polish on her toenails. And I watch. I watch her through the little window in my confessional box. She doesn't know I am there. I am desperately waiting for her to lie in the aisle and do thirty abdominals [sic], but instead, she senses someone breathing behind the cloth and stares directly toward the confessional box as if she knows I am there, watching her. (p. 185)

Ann E. Kaplan, in an article on the male gaze explains that '[...] voyeurism, linked to disparagement, has a sadistic side, and is involved with pleasure through control or domination [...].'⁵³ By deciding not to return to her hometown and by ceasing to work in the peepshow, the protagonist refuses to be the object of a dominating male gaze. Esperanza chooses instead to take control of her life. Escandón reveals that coming to terms with the loss of her daughter goes hand in hand with her empowerment as an individual woman.

The resistant aspect of popular culture

Escandón, like Cisneros, expresses the multilayered significance of popular culture forms such as the *telenovela*. The Mexican author reflects with great humour the way in which characters are obsessed and addicted to the melodramatic plots of the *telenovela*. Once again, the media, and especially the soap opera, become the model against which one should measure oneself. In Tijuana, Esperanza phones the priest of her hometown, whom she has been confiding in all along. She has the intention of confessing her sins, but the priest tells her that confessions can only be made in person. Nevertheless, the priest attentively listens to Esperanza's confidences and learns about a client who has bought the 'exclusivity' of Esperanza:

"He wants me just for himself. I am lucky. I don't have to worry about other clients."
 "I see. He bought your exclusivity."
 "That's one way to put it. I don't know if that's common in this business."

⁵³ Ann E. Kaplan, 'Is the gaze male?', in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, ed. by Ann E. Kaplan (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 23-35 (p. 31).

"It happened in *The Truth About Giovanna*."

"Well, I never watched that soap opera, Father, so I wouldn't know. [...]" (p. 122)

Father Salvador demonstrates that this specific knowledge arises from the viewing of *telenovelas*, revealing the extent to which this form plays an important role in his life. Even for the priest, *telenovelas* have become what Ilan Stavans describes as 'the opiate of the Mexican masses'.⁵⁴ His fascination with *telenovelas* is manifested in another passage. At the beginning of the novel, Father Salvador maintains a conversation with God, which he hastily terminates since the *telenovela* is about to start: 'So please, dear God, help me. And now, I have to go. It's almost eight o'clock and I don't want to miss my soap opera. Tonight, Elizabeth Constanza finds out she has a blind twin sister. Amen.' (p. 23) With great irony, Escandón reveals how the sensational and unrealistic story lines of the *telenovela* manage to keep a priest hooked.

Television also plays an important role in the life of Esperanza's friend, Soledad. In a letter to Esperanza, Soledad reprimands her for the risks she must have taken when crossing the border illegally: 'You must have risked your life doing it. I can imagine you running from the border guards, hiding in sewer pipes, walking by night, and avoiding the knife of thieves, like in the movie *Los Ilegales*.' (p. 195) Soledad compares Esperanza's experiences to events she has seen in a film, rather than to those she must have watched in the news or read in newspapers.⁵⁵ Soledad also feels passionate about *telenovelas*. According to Esperanza, Soledad 'has the television on all day and watches the soap operas, as if we didn't have enough tragedy in our lives.' (p. 12) But the *telenovela* is also the means that enable Soledad to show her emotions, and to become compassionate:

⁵⁴ Ilan Stavans, 'Unmasking Marcos', in *The Riddle of Cantinflas*, pp. 13-24 (p. 19).

⁵⁵ I haven't been able to locate this film which leads me to believe that perhaps, the film she is referring to is *Alambrista* (1978), a Mexican film directed by Robert M. Young which narrates the experiences of a Mexican man who crosses the border illegally. This film mirrors the dangers faced by those who engage in border crossing, such as being attacked and robbed by thieves.

Esperanza knew Soledad cried inconsolably at certain moments during her beloved soap operas, yet when it came to her own tragedies, she would always act as if she could take anything. At her husband's funeral, she was the only one who did not cry, at least in public. Because of that, many people believed that Soledad had never really loved Alfredo, that she had married him just because he resembled the late Mexican movie idol Pedro Infante.⁵⁶ (p. 30)

Soledad's reactions to the *telenovelas*' tragic narratives epitomize Linda Craft's argument, as she says that this form 'offers a medium for exposing and detailing their [spectators] suffering in order to exact a maximum level of identification and pathos for the reader.' (p. 205)

Although Esperanza does not rely on soap operas to ascribe an order to her world, she is very dependent on religious signs. Whilst Father Salvador and Soledad rely on television for comfort, Esperanza ascribes a religious reading to anyone with the slight similarity to a saint. In Los Angeles, the judge Haynes buys a bag of marihuana from a young African-American man whom Esperanza believes to be San Martin de Porres, 'the black saint she loved so much. Perhaps he had materialized to point her in the direction of the Fiesta Theater.' (p. 165) Also, when she recognizes the travel agency that Haynes had told her about, she interprets this as a sign from San Judas Tadeo. Similarly, Esperanza's encounters with the wrestler El Angel are described as if they were religious apparitions. When she sees the television sport's report of the wrestling fight between El Angel and some other wrestler, the protagonist:

couldn't help but touch the screen with the tips of her fingers and make the sign of the cross. She made the same gesture on her saints' glass cases in church back home. [...] Now she was performing the ritual on a TV set. (p. 171)

The fact that Esperanza is extremely devoted to her saints and that she ends up marrying a masked wrestler is no coincidence. While she might not be attracted to the far-fetched plots of *telenovelas*, she is fascinated by images and icons to which

⁵⁶ Pedro Infante (1917-1947) was a very famous icon of Mexican cinema. Although he started his career as a singer he ended up being a very successful actor, working in films such as *Nosotros los pobres* (1947). His popularity was enlarged by his tragic death in a plane crash at the age of 40.

she assigns extraordinary authority. These figures' magnetism allows Escandón to address Mexico's fascination with popular iconography.

Although televised forms are portrayed as merely an entertaining and escapist medium, they are invested with a more positive significance once Esperanza crosses the border into the U.S. Whilst waiting for someone in Los Angeles, Esperanza views the television and 'watched the last segment of a soap opera and wondered if Soledad was back home, watching it at the same time.' (p. 169) This passage shows that the transnational and popular aspect of *telenovelas* allows Mexicans to be connected across the border. Ana López makes a similar point when referring to the international appeal of a popular *telenovela*: 'Hispanics in New York, Florida, California, and the south-west watched *Simplemente Maria* together with Mexico City.'⁵⁷ The *telenovela*'s capacity to allow Mexican immigrants to be connected to their country is also noted by Guillermo Gómez-Peña who claims that 'Mexican immigrants maintain their main connection with that marvellous, imaginary country called Mexico via soap operas.'⁵⁸

Mexico-U.S. relationships

Despite presenting an idealistic view of Esperanza's experiences in Los Angeles, Escandón also provides interesting comments on Mexican immigration. The book addresses a social problem that affects both countries involved. According to an article in *El País*, every year 350,000 Mexicans travel to the U.S., and two out of three do this in a clandestine way. Every day, a Mexican dies trying to avoid the Border patrol. As a result of this migratory movement, more than four million undocumented Mexicans live now in the U.S.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ López, 'Our Welcomed Guests', p. 266.

⁵⁸ Gómez-Peña, '1995 - Terreno Peligrosos', p. 133.

⁵⁹ 'Una cajita feliz para entrar en EE UU', *El País*, 1 June 2001, available at <http://www.elpais.es>. This article explains that illegal immigration has become so significant in Mexico, that the government is planning on issuing special rucksacks to those intending to cross the border. The rucksack would

Since the novel deals, to a large extent, with Mexican immigration, it is no surprise that Escandón discusses the border city of Tijuana. However, Tijuana is not only portrayed as a staging post for illegal entry into the U.S., but also as the place where North Americans go to enjoy themselves and get involved in illegal matters. Esperanza's search takes her to this city, which she has heard described as 'the most visited place on earth, mostly by people just passing through.' (p. 91) On the coach that takes her to the city, people describe it as 'the largest cantina in the world' and 'just one huge whorehouse.' (p. 91) Néstor García Canclini depicts Tijuana very similarly as he says that this city has traditionally been known for its 'cabarets, dancing halls, liquor stores, a donde los norteamericanos llegaban para eludir las prohibiciones sexuales, de juegos de azar y bebidas alcohólicas de su país.'⁶⁰ Although for immigrants like Esperanza Tijuana represents a crossing point, for North American individuals like the judge Scott Haynes, it is a city where one can act outside the law.⁶¹ The judge travels back and forth between San Diego and Tijuana, exchanging identities and attitudes towards life. For him, Mexico was;

that piece of land where one met the other in an unavoidable frontal collision. But what he really loved about the border was that he could be a respectable, law-abiding, and law-enforcing San Diego judge and in a matter of minutes, become an unidentifiable being sleeping in the arms of a prostitute, in a place where no one cared if what he did was right or wrong. (p. 159)

Judge Haynes maintains, borrowing from Said's lexicon, an orientalist attitude towards Mexico, perceiving it as an exotic place where he can find maternal love in the arms of Mexican prostitutes. In his essay, 'In Athens Once', Richard Rodríguez makes a similar point by 'genderizing' Mexico-U.S. relations when referring to

contain things such as oral serum, medicines for poisonous bites, bandages, canned food, aspirins and condoms.

⁶⁰ Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (México D.F.: Grijaldo, 1989), p. 294.

'cabarets, dancing halls, liquor stores, where the North Americans went in order to evade the their own country's prohibitions related with sex, gambling and alcohol.'

⁶¹ Maria Novaro's film *El jardín del Eden* (1994) reflects how hundreds of Mexicans visit this city with the intention of crossing the border. It also addresses the economic trade involved in helping these individuals cross the border successfully.

Tijuana's popularity: 'Mexico lay down and the gringo paid in the morning'.⁶² Although the judge interchanges his identities with extreme ease, Tijuana and San Diego are not easily mistaken. San Diego is described as 'exuberant, [...] filled with impeccable golf courses' whilst Tijuana is a 'barren [city] where dust devils never gave local housekeepers a minute of rest.' (p. 158) Richard Rodríguez has also noted that despite being geographically close, these two cities maintain a historical distance:

Tijuana and San Diego are not in the same historical time zone. Tijuana is poised at the beginning of an industrial age, a Dickensian city with palm trees. [...] San Diego faces west, looks resolutely out to sea. San Diego is in the past, guarding its quality of life.⁶³

The San Diego judge enjoys a privileged position by crossing and re-crossing the border as many times as he pleases. However, Esperanza has to cross it illegally, hiding in the boot of the judge's car. The judge and Esperanza, both dwellers of the border, do not share the same status. This view is articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa who argues a similar point when she says that in the borderlands, 'the only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites.'⁶⁴

Judge Haynes and his search for a mother figure is not the only metaphor of unity represented by the border city of Tijuana. Doña Trini, the owner of the Pink Palace brothel and her partner, Cesar, are described as if they had exchanged sexualities: '[Cesar] was clearly a man. She could tell by the bulk between his legs, outlined by his tight black pants. But she sensed a certain feminine side to him. It seemed as if he had stolen Doña Trini's femininity. Or maybe Doña Trini had stolen César's masculinity.' (p. 112) Due to its symbolic location, Tijuana is a space where opposites are exchanged and one finds his/her *other*, be it gender, sexuality or

⁶² Richard Rodríguez, 'In Athens Once', in *Days of Obligation*, pp. 80-106 (p.88).

⁶³ Rodríguez, 'In Athens Once', p. 84. This view is also expressed in Steven Soderbergh's film *Traffic* (2000) where San Diego is portrayed as a city where wealthy people engage in a luxurious life style. However, Tijuana is depicted as a corrupted and dark city, where people from San Diego can go to obtain drugs.

⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pp. 3-4.

partner.⁶⁵ Mary Ellen Wolf, an academic who researches the transvestites that live on the border, also expresses this idea. Wolf argues that the economic opportunity and liberal attitude of the border appeals to transvestites who may come from small towns where 'they would be treated as complete outcasts.' She adds: '[...] I've heard it said that you can abandon both your nationality and your sexual identity on the banks of the Rio Grande.'⁶⁶

The clash between Mexico and the U.S. produces fascinating manifestations of popular culture. In Tijuana, Esperanza learns of the existence of a patron saint and protector of illegal immigrants, San Juan Soldado. Attracted by religious figures, she buys a couple of statues of this saint, 'a poor young Mexican dressed in military uniform.' (p. 155) When Esperanza says that this saint is unknown to her, the seller of statues explains to her that "He is a Tijuana original. A martyr. An underdog, like us. We need more saints here than anywhere else." (p. 156) The seller then tells her how this saint helped his brother-in-law: "[he] called on Juan Soldado as he escaped from six Border Patrol agents. Then, when he filed for amnesty, he used a scapulary just like this one and his request was approved. He owns a body shop in Santa Ana." (p. 156) Impressed by the story and intending to cross the border, Esperanza fastens a scapulary to her clothes, 'welcoming the new saint into her life.' (p. 156)

According to David Undergerleider Kepler, the legend of Juan Soldado narrates that in 1930 Juan Castillo Morales was wrongly accused of the rape and murder of a young woman.⁶⁷ He was not allowed to defend himself and insulted those who had accused him before being shot. Juan Soldado's popularity in Tijuana, argues this critic, stems from the fact that he, as well as those who had to leave their homes and

⁶⁵ In the film adaptation of the novel, the actor embodying Doña Trini is a man, placing emphasis in the character's manliness.

⁶⁶ Mary Ellen Wolf, 'Out of Frame: Border(line) Images', *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (1997), 494-508 (p. 497).

⁶⁷ David Undergerleider Kepler, 'La religiosidad popular en Tijuana: la devoción a Juan Soldado', *El Bordo*, 4. http://kino.tij.uia.mx/publicaciones/elbordo/Vol4/bordo4_soldado.html

family to head north in search of work, are victims of injustice and are discontented with the system. Those who have to immigrate and live in harsh conditions understand Juan Soldado's experiences of injustice and grievance. Another matter to be considered when trying to understand this unofficial saint's idolization is, argues Undergerleider, the lack of devotion towards an official Catholic saint in Tijuana:

Ciertamente la reubicación geográfica con su necesario proceso de desterritorialización, experimentados por parte de la mayoría de los habitantes de Tijuana, representa una ruptura con la vivencia que proporcionan las tradiciones de sus fiestas patronales y devociones populares en su pueblo de origen. [...] en toda la ciudad de Tijuana no hay ninguna devoción a uno de los santos "oficiales" de la Iglesia Católica que sobresale por su popularidad, la gente busca por donde canalizar sus súplicas de auxilio [...].⁶⁸

San Juan Soldado not only fills the gap left by the lack of an official patron saint, but also represents and addresses the concerns of those who visit Tijuana, that is, potential border crossers who plan a life in the U.S.⁶⁹ This figure embodies the ways in which popular religiosity re-articulates a legendary icon for resistant purposes. The popularity of Juan Soldado is reflected in Maria Novaro's film *El jardín del Edén* as it shows his shrine and the great number of milagros pinned to it.

Another character, which re-constructs a popular culture icon in order to address the socio-political circumstances of Mexican immigrants, is that of El Angel Justiciero. This character clearly adopts the symbolism of the legendary 1940s Mexican professional wrestler, El Enmascarado de Plata, the silver masked man whose real identity remained a secret for many years. This wrestler, popularly known as El Santo - and in real life called Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta (1915-1984) - famously worn a silver head mask.⁷⁰ The fascination surrounding this personage was reinforced by his acting career. From 1958 until 1982, he was the hero of low-budget

⁶⁸ 'Certainly, the geographical relocation, with its necessary process of deterritorialization, experienced by part of the majority of the Tijuana inhabitants, represents a break with the experiences provided by their own villages' celebrations of patron saints and popular devotions. [...] in the entire city of Tijuana there is no devotion for an "official" saint of the Catholic Church that stands out for its popularity. Thus, people find ways to channel their requests for help [...].'

⁶⁹ In their book *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*, Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey identify the Virgin San Juan de los Lagos as the most popular icon assigned with the successful crossing of the border. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995)

⁷⁰ See <http://santoandfriends.com>

action films fighting evil forces such as vampires, witches or aliens. In films such as *El Santo contra la invasión de los marcianos* (Santo against the Martian Invasion) (1966), El Santo represented the power of justice over wrong. El Santo has become a famous icon of popular culture as well as a national hero. Monsiváis argues that the fascination with this icon is based on his embodiment of various attributes: 'Hay luchadores de su calidad o tal vez mejores, pero El Santo es un rito de la pobreza, de los consuelos peleoneros dentro del Gran Desconsuelo-que-es-la vida, la mezcla exacta de tragedia clásica, circo, deporte olímpico, comedia, teatro de variedad y catarsis laboral.'⁷¹

The mysteriousness and the search for justice symbolized by El Santo have lead other Mexican individuals to mask themselves in the name of social equity. Superbarrio is another masked individual, dressed in a similar fashion to El Santo, who arose from the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that affected Mexico City. This freedom fighter demanded the government to act more efficiently towards the reconstruction of the city. Despite originating from this specific time, Superbarrio has become very popular and 'is received in high government offices and has extended his agenda to denouncing and fighting police corruption, pollution, and transportation problems [...]'.⁷² Another masked freedom fighter is Subcomandante Marcos whose balaclava maintained his identity hidden, but also brought much international interest and awareness of the Chiapas conflict.⁷³

Escandón's character, El Angel, is clearly based on El Santo: he also wears an extravagant wrestling outfit, a glittering mask and his identity is unknown to the public. But Escandón's character also embodies the fight for justice as he recalls not

⁷¹ Carlos Monsiváis, 'La hora de la máscara protagónica. El Santo Contra los escépticos en material de mitos', in *Los rituales del caos* (Mexico D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1995), pp. 125-33 (p. 128). 'There are wrestlers of his same quality or even better, but El Santo represents a ritual of poverty, of the aggressive consolations within the Great-Despair-that-is-life, the exact combination of classic tragedy, circus, Olympic games, comedy, variety theatre and labour catharsis.'

⁷² Olalquiaga, p. 86.

⁷³ Another famous masked freedom fighter of Latin American popular culture is El Zorro.

only the popular wrestling hero but also icons such as Superbarrio. His wrestling name, El Angel justiciero, the Righteous Angel, reinforces this idea. The freedom fighter aspect of El Angel is made explicit during the wrestling match where Esperanza sees him for the first time. El Angel's opponent is La Migra (Immigration and Naturalization Services), who is described as

a masked mastodon wearing dark green shorts, an INS officer's hat, and infrared glasses [...] His arrogant attitude was not well received by the fans. Most of them hooted. He was surrounded by a group of pretty girls dressed as policewomen in miniskirts. They danced around the wrestler and took turns kissing his biceps. The crowd screamed, "Wishful thinking! Then roared, "Loser!" and threw paper cups in the air. (p. 200)

In contrast, the appearance of El Angel Justiciero makes the audience '[go] crazy, yelling, whistling, and clapping. He was the definite favorite.' (p. 201) Predictably, El Angel wins the fight, and La Migra, following the rules of Mexican wrestling, unmask himself, a sign of defeat and humiliation. In the space of the ring Mexican immigrants symbolically confront and defeat the institutions that oppress them and find alternative ways to express their rage and frustration. This passage exemplifies Roland Barthes' argument as he reveals that wrestling is not simply a sport, but that it has a more significant meaning. In his article 'The World of Wrestling', he says that:

What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. [...] In [theatre and wrestling], what is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private. [...] suffering appears as inflicted with emphasis and conviction, for everyone must not only see that the man suffers but also and above all understand why he suffers.⁷⁴

This idea is reflected in the novel, as the narrator describes with great detail the knocks and pain experienced by both wrestlers. Following Barthes' line of thought, El Angel's suffering symbolizes the anguish that the viewers feel when confronted with the Immigration and Naturalisation Services. In the ring, viewers watch the downfall of La Migra, an unrealistic event in real life. By supporting El Angel, Mexican individuals express what they cannot articulate publicly. The author reveals

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling', in *A Barthes Reader* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1989), pp. 19-30 (pp. 22-23).

how a wrestling match, usually seen as an entertainment, enables the disempowered to express their opposition against the dominant forces. Similarly, the wrestler El Angel becomes a symbol of resistance against North American law enforcement systems. He also becomes Esperanza's 'guardian angel' helping her in her search and reinforcing the idea that he represents integrity.

Both El Angel and San Juan Soldado reflect the ways in which Mexican popular culture finds new means to express the unique realities arising from dislocation. Canclini claims that the migratory movements and crossings of cultures during modernity involve;

tensiones entre desterritorialización y reterritorialización. Con esto me refiero a dos procesos: la pérdida de la relación "natural" de la cultura con los territorios geográficos y sociales, y, al mismo tiempo, ciertas relocalizaciones territoriales relativas, parciales, de las viejas producciones simbólicas.⁷⁵ (p. 288)

In a society where many Mexican immigrants live, popular figures such as the wrestler El Santo and the soldier Juan Soldado are reconstructed in order to resist U.S. policies against immigration and to assert a transnational identity.

The border

The strong presence of Mexican popular icons and Spanish-speaking television give the impression that Los Angeles is an extension of Mexico. Esperanza does not encounter communication problems as every person she talks to speaks Spanish. His exclusive client, Scott, had already told her in Tijuana that "You won't need to speak English in California [...] Half the people speak Spanish here." (p. 169)

Walking through the streets of Los Angeles, Esperanza notices that;

All the storefront signs were in Spanish. So was the music coming from huge speakers in nearly every cluttered store. People walking by spoke in Spanish. Newsstands sold magazines in Spanish. The smell of tacos floated on the sidewalk, luring people into tiny Mexican restaurants. (p. 189)

⁷⁵ 'tensions between de-territorialization, and re-territorialization. There are two processes: the loss of the 'natural' relation of the culture with the geographical and social territories, and, at the same time, certain relative, partial territorial relocations of the old symbolic productions.'

In an interview, the author replicates this idea of Los Angeles as a Mexican city: 'Como en Los Angeles hay más de cinco millones de mexicanos, la podemos considerar provincia mexicana [...].'⁷⁶ Escandón expresses with great feeling that crossing the border and living in the U.S. does not involve the loss of Mexican identity. Cultural critic Mike Davis argues a similar point by saying that '[...] the border doesn't end at San Clemente. Indeed, as any ten-year-old in East L.A. [...] knows, borders tend to follow working-class Latinos wherever they live and regardless of how long they have been in the United States.'⁷⁷ In a sense, Escandón's articulation of Los Angeles as a Mexican city challenges the existence of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Although the author exposes with great detail the *Mexicanization* undergone by the city of Los Angeles, she fails to address the negative aspects encountered by Mexican immigrants. Despite being an undocumented immigrant herself, Esperanza has no trouble finding a respectable job in a travel agency or renting a flat as soon as she arrives. A passing remark about the Californian proposition that aims to deny welfare benefits to illegal immigrants: 'She saw a wall with more graffiti than it could display, with the signs that read: NO A LA 187.' (p. 166) In this sense, Escandón's positive rendering of the experiences of an 'illegal alien' distances itself from those of other Chicana authors such as Helena Maria Viramontes in her texts 'Cariboo Café' or *Under the Feet of Jesus*. The 'Cariboo Café' for instance describes the harsh conditions suffered by a family of illegal immigrants who aim to have 'a

⁷⁶ Interview with Escandón in <http://www.santitos.com>.

'As there are more than five million Mexicans in Los Angeles, we can consider it a Mexican city.'

⁷⁷ Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, p. 60.

See Mario T. García's article where he discusses the cultural identity of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. García states that '[...] crossing the border rather than breaking with one's nationality and culture instead reaffirmed them.' (p. 199) In 'La Frontera: The Border as Symbol and Reality in Mexican-American Thought', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 1.2 (1985), 197-225.

finer future where the toilet was one's own and the children needn't be frightened.'⁷⁸
(p. 61)

In *Esperanza's*, Mexican popular culture is presented as expressions that allow Mexican immigrants to assert their identity in the U.S. and resist assimilation. However, this does not mean that these art forms remain untouched. Instead, they are manipulated to address the migrants' concerns, especially those related to illegal immigration. These manifestations are the result of the crossing between Mexican and North American culture, what is generally described as border culture. Anzaldúa expounds:

The U.S. Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture.⁷⁹

Nuria Vilanova argues that the border is articulated differently by Chicano/a and Mexican writers. According to this critic, Mexicans tend to depict the border as a real space that divides two countries, whilst Chicanos/as are inclined to describe it as an abstraction, as a non-specific in-between space as well as a state of mind.⁸⁰ After a discussion of Escandón's novel, one can conclude that the Mexican author employs both approaches towards the concept of the border. Its physicality is made obvious when *Esperanza* crosses it in the boot of the car and by the examination of issues related to illegal immigration. Also, Escandón presents Los Angeles as a place where the intersection between two cultures produces a third space and a third culture.

The texts discussed herein present a multifaceted view of Mexican and Chicano/a popular culture. The more interesting and constructive re-articulations of Mexican popular culture are made by immigrants. The re-shaping of religious and

⁷⁸ The phrase 'a toilet of their own' is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's work where she expressed the necessity of women to have a room of their own in order to fulfil themselves artistically. This way, Viramontes expresses the basic needs required, making Woolf's requirements look superfluous and condescending.

⁷⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Núria Vilanova, 'Another Textual Frontier: Contemporary Fiction on the Northern Mexican Border', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 21.1 (2002), 73-98.

wrestling figures permit legal and illegal Mexican migrants to express their opposition to the authorities and to address their socio-economical situation. According to Thomas Tufte, popular cultural expressions are 'in constant interaction with the sociocultural contexts within which they exist and thereby develop as active components in everyday life.' (p. 19)

The art form that is depicted from different perspectives, and hence, is best understood, is the *telenovela*. In some texts, this art form is articulated as manipulative and in alliance with the dominant ideology, whilst in others resistance to its oppressive messages is evident. Even those texts which posit *telenovela* as an art form that manipulates women often also disclose a positive aspect. This mass-cultural expression allows women to socialize and to assert their cultural identity. Considering that the U.S. media presents the Latino/a population quite negatively, *telenovelas* counteract these images and provide characters to which viewers can relate. These media forms also enable the viewer in the U.S. to assert the linguistic aspect of their identity and to obtain a sense of connection with his/her country of origin. When the *telenovela* is described as a form that maintains the female spectator trapped in her oppressed situation, it is also clear that it is part of many other systems that persuade women to remain passive and silent. Whether portrayed as degrading or empowering, all texts manifest the transnational aspect of this art form. Sandra Cisneros even presents *telenovelas* as a significant part of Chicanas' transnational identity.

These four texts invite the reader to appreciate the many layers of significance hidden in seemingly shallow entertaining art forms. These texts also reveal that an apt comprehension of these expressions cannot be obtained unless the cultural and socio-economical circumstances in which they take place have been considered.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to outline the main themes and directions of recent Chicano/a writing. Concentrating on its revisionist direction, it has developed four major areas that are reconfigured in order to address issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and social justice. As I have explained, the period after the Chicano movement saw the emergence of more individual voices, in particular that of Chicanas. These writers questioned the viability of nationalism to free Chicanos/as from economic and social oppression, and criticised the indigenist ideology. Chicanas played an important role in the destabilization of nationalism and indigenism, and revised the history that glorified male icons such as Aztec warriors. This woman-oriented indigenism recovered female goddesses and re-wrote Mexican history, assigning an active role to figures traditionally seen as passive, such as La Malinche. Even though their feminist approach attempted to map women into Chicanos' history and mythology, the work of writers such as Anzaldúa and Castillo has been accused of presenting essentialist notions and articulating a nationalist ideology.

With the appearance of more individualist views during the 1980s and 1990s, Chicano/a literature becomes a heterogeneous writing, making it hard to pin point a unique direction. The work of writers such as Michelle Serros and Richard Rodríguez reinforces the idea of Chicano/a writing as a complex body of work by lampooning the pedestals of Chicano/a ethnicity. Lesbian writers such as Cherrie Moraga incorporate the subject of (homo)sexuality in their work and denounce the homophobia of the Chicano/a community. They also reflect that their experiences as Chicana individuals cannot be separated from their experiences as lesbian women. These new voices opened a debate on the subject of Chicano/a 'authenticity', and called into question the idea that nationalist-oriented themes, machismo or Spanish

language usage guarantee 'ethnic authenticity'. An innovative approach proposed by writers like Serros is to accept and embrace an 'inauthentic' identity, thus refusing to rely on essentialist definitions of ethnicity.

The re-articulation of female role models becomes a central theme in Chicana writing. Believing that Chicanas are subjected to reductive and passive female role models, they reconceive them, investing them with a more empowering significance. The three Mexican female role models – the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche and La Llorona – become central figures in the writing of Chicanas since they are represented as a source of empowerment for women. Anzaldúa believes that '[...] the true identity of all three has been subverted – *Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people.'¹ One of the most important strategies employed in the revision of these figures involves re-examining the history and mythology from which they arise. La Malinche, a historical figure traditionally depicted as treacherous for her role as translator and lover of Cortés, is reconfigured as the founder of *mestizaje*. The re-symbolization of the Virgin of Guadalupe has a two-fold implication. On the one hand, her link with indigenous goddesses is emphasized, thus inviting Chicanas to interpret this icon as a link with the pre-Columbian past. On the other hand, Guadalupe's role in the uprising of Mexicans/Chicanos is also highlighted, suggesting that she also represents a symbol of rebellion against the dominant. In Chicana writing, her racial aspect is stressed, allowing Chicanas to relate to her on this level. Because Guadalupe is such a powerful icon, she also represents a threat to the omnipresent and mighty figure of God. Even though she tends to be articulated as an empowering female icon, some Chicanas and Chicano writers nevertheless reveal that she is a problematic figure

¹ *Borderlands*, p. 31.

since she is a Marian symbol. The Virgin of Guadalupe is also an important presence within Chicana visual art. Esther Hernández and Alma López situate her in a lesbian context, suggesting that gay Chicanas also relate to her. Another Mexican female icon re-examined in Chicana writing is La Llorona. By tracing the indigenous deities from which she descends, Chicanas shed a new light on this figure. In these texts, La Llorona moves from being a murderous, passive figure to an active agent, fighting against patriarchal violence. In the re-articulation of these three symbols, the role of the narrator becomes relevant as the interpreter of these figures re-reads certain aspects to adapt or suit his/her circumstances. It is worth noting that in these Chicana re-symbolizations, these three female icons tend to be humanized and adapted to contemporary circumstances. For instance, in some literary and artistic productions, La Llorona and Virgin of Guadalupe are lesbian women or deal with an abusive husband. In this way, Chicanas manifest the need to update and turn these figures into accessible icons.

The theme of positive figures and role models is also disclosed in other areas. Chicano/a writers criticize the reductive and negative role models set for Chicanas by Catholicism, the media and folklore. In *So Far from God* Castillo proposes to create new religious figures and practices that reflect the socio-political circumstances of Latinos/as. Writers such as John Rechy portray the *telenovela* as a medium that sets unrealistic goals for women and blames it for turning women into submissive individuals. Cisneros, on the other hand, analyses this art form from different perspectives and argues that it induces women to remain passive but that the female viewer can also respond to its oppressive messages. Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains also participates in this project by substituting a religious figure with the Mexican actress Dolores del Rio in an altar, implying that the latter is a more accessible and empowering role model.

The negative image of Latinos/as and Chicanos/as presented by the mainstream is also denounced. Writers such as Michelle Serros criticize how the media presents a reductive image of Latinos/as. Images of Latinos/as are contradictory as, they are portrayed as exotic and folkloric, but also as lazy or criminals. Guillermo Gómez-Peña states: 'The current media war against the Latino cultural other is intercut with eulogies to our products. [...] It's all very confusing.'² Chicano/a writing can, in a sense, be interpreted as a response to these mainstream' stereotypical images by describing the Chicano/a community from their point of view and thus giving a faithful representation.

An important conclusion that is drawn from Chicanos/as revisionist writing is that not one institution or cultural form is solely blamed for manipulating women or providing passive female figures. As I explained in the discussion of 'Woman Hollering Creek' the oppressive ideology presented in *telenovelas* complements and supports that presented in folklore. For these reasons, it is no coincidence that Cisneros, a writer that revises the myth of La Llorona, also exposes *telenovelas* as manipulative.

The texts discussed herein have revealed the problems of constructing a transcultural identity. These processes involve re-reading Mexican culture in a way that allows it to be adapted to their socio-political goals and needs. The manipulation of popular cultural art forms permits Chicanos/as to articulate their sense of ethnic pride but also to resist assimilation. For instance, Chicanas claim the *telenovela* as a form that enables them to assert their identity, and to be connected to their cultural origins.

Chicano/a literary production also reveals that Chicanos/as are not passive receivers of a cultural baggage. To inherit a culture also involves questioning its

² *Warrior for Gringostroika*, p. 53.

relation with contemporary life. These texts also challenge the notion that the only way to disclose a Chicano/a identity is through the faithful re-enactment and articulation of Mexican cultural practices and figures. On many occasions, Chicanos and especially Chicanas reflect that the only way they can embrace and pass on their culture is by firstly revising it. As I have explained, much Chicano/a writing also deals with the problems and dilemmas of coming to terms with having two 'homes' and two origins. Bharati Mukherjee raises similar issues in her discussions of the problems faced by second generation Indian-American: 'Parents express rage or despair at their U.S.-born children's forgetting of, or indifference to, some aspects of Indian culture. [...] Is it so terrible that our children are discovering or inventing homelands for themselves?'³ As my analysis of *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* showed, constructing a 'new homeland' can be a painful and complex process, often involving a nostalgic vision and a re-reading of the mainstream and Mexican cultures.

Chicano/a writing re-appropriates and re-vamps Mexican literary themes and cultural icons. Despite the Mexican origin of Guadalupe, La Llorona and La Malinche, their deconstruction and revitalization only takes place in Chicano/a literature. Elena Poniatowska argues that Chicana women are, in comparison to Mexican women, more liberated and unhibited from cultural constraints. She even maintains that 'Mexican women have a lot to learn from the freshness and aggressiveness in Chicana writings. Their imagination and their sensuality go much farther than ours.' (p. 50) Thus, the revisionist direction of Chicano/a literature could encourage Mexican writers to undertake a similar approach and begin to reconceive female cultural icons.

³ Bharati Mukherjee, 'Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 20.1 (1996), 29-34 (p. 34).

Through its literature, we can understand that the Chicano/a community is not a homogenous group whose political ideology can be easily summarized. The Chicano/a community is composed by individuals in different stages of assimilation or residence in the U.S., and thus with diverse views towards issues such as Chicano/a identity or culture. Hence, Chicano/a writing is a complex and heterogeneous body of work, offering diverse approaches on Chicano/a identity and refusing generalizations. With the waning of nationalism, Chicano/a writers do not feel anymore compelled to represent a collective 'we' and feel freer to present more individualistic views on aspects such as culture, politics, gender and sexuality. Chicano/a writers offer very different, even opposed, views on subjects such as popular culture or ethnicity. Hence, we can conclude that contemporary Chicano/a writing shifts from the perspective 'we-Chicanos' to the 'heterogeneous I', encompassing conflicting and disparate views on Chicano/a cultural identity.

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